

# Outdoor

## X4

## OTTER THE OVERLANDER

*Returning a 1965 Volkswagen Bus to its Former Glory*



BEHIND THE REDWOOD CURTAIN

URAL GEAR-UP MOTORCYCLE ADVENTURE • TERRADROP ALPHA TRAILER

TOYOTA FJ40 PRESERVATION PROJECT • LIVIN' THE VAN LIFE

THE GREAT ESCAPE - A PHOTOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

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ISSUE

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# Outdoor

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## THE OUTDOORX4 TEAM .....

Frank Ledwell ..... Publisher & Editor-in-Chief  
Andrea Ledwell ..... Associate Publisher  
Jessica Blank ..... Art Director  
Jerod Foster ..... Copy Editor  
Stan Wright ..... Senior Editor  
Jason Sakurai ..... Senior Editor  
Jason Varnadoe ..... Social Media Editor  
Daniel Thornton ..... Podcast & Campfire Editor  
Caleb Murphy ..... Audio Edition Editor  
Randy Langstraat ..... Senior Photographer  
Scott Brown ..... Senior Photographer  
Bill Drago ..... Treadmarks Columnist

## BUSINESS .....

Casey Vandenoever ..... Advertising Sales Director

## CONTRIBUTORS .....

Ben Easley, Bruce Smith, Bob Theobald, Charles Bell, Chris Jeyes,  
Eric Arnold, Eric Iwashita, Heide Brandes, Josh Jewell, Nicholas  
Bratton, Reality Media House, Susan Drago

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### CONTACT:

OutdoorX4 Magazine  
P.O. Box 8306  
Spring, TX 77387  
Phone: 832-280-7950



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A few months ago, I went through the process of building a new computer system for my office as the old system I had been using was nearly as old as OutdoorX4, dating back to 2014. During the process of backing up and reloading an enormous library of content from the old system and our office network, I came across a batch of photos from the first “overland-style” trip I took with my best friend while exploring in a Jeep TJ Rubicon I had purchased a few years after graduating from college. Comparing it to the hundreds of vehicle-based trips I’ve been on since, it was undoubtedly one of the most memorable...and most simplistic.

When my friend Richard and I planned out our jaunt to west Texas’ Big Bend region, the only significant considerations were cost and time. We hadn’t been out of school but a handful of years and with Richard and his wife having recently had a baby, and I being constrained with a job that required a good amount of responsibility with limited vacation time, we both stretched every dollar possible and days we had for travel with limited means while still getting the most from the experience. At the time, there were three roof top tent companies being offered in the U.S. – AutoHome, Eezi-Awn and Howling Moon. There was only one off-road specific trailer company, formerly known as Adventure Trailers and now known as AT Overland, and the overland market itself didn’t have a name. Most everyone I knew used what we used on that first trip when packing up and loading their vehicle for a self-sufficient adventure including: plastic bins for storage; a simple two-burner stove for meal prep; our backpacking gear such as Jetboil, headlamps, and lightweight clothing; and a ground tent with a ground cloth. We didn’t bother with camp chairs because there weren’t any we could afford that were compact or small enough to fit into the limited cargo area of a two-door Jeep. In short, we kept it simple out of necessity and looking back, simplicity is what made the experience as enjoyable and as memorable as it was.

The narrative now has become you need the latest and greatest, whether it’s a truck that costs nearly as much as a house or enough gear to support a small village while traveling to a remote destination that’s unrealistic for the masses. YouTube, social media, and large event series have created a culture and environment in which anyone who isn’t into “overland” is intimidated to go out and explore as Richard and I did for fear they can’t afford it or that a simplistic approach isn’t what “overland” is.

The fact is the overland market has created a monster within itself and the narrative has been perpetuated to the extent the impact has resulted in hundreds of companies offering the same product and often times doing so by stealing the work of those who set the foundation in place to begin with. That’s also not considering the media outlets, including OutdoorX4, who have played our role in coalescing to this message rather than getting back to what “overland” is truly all about: camaraderie and responsible exploration of the areas traveled to and doing so thoughtfully and as simply as possible in the vehicle you already have.

So, the next time you’re left thinking you can’t “overland” unless you have every bit of product that’s out there, think otherwise. Some of the greatest and most memorable experiences you may ever have might very well be those where friendship and being in the moment are all you need.

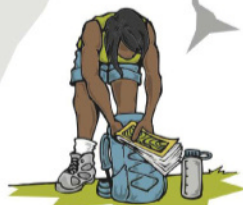
Frank Ledwell  
EDITOR & PUBLISHER



X4



# Please Practice LEAVE NO TRACE



## Know Before You Go

- Be prepared! Remember food and water, and clothes to protect you from cold, heat and rain.
- Use maps to plan where you're going. Check them along the way so you'll stay on course and won't get lost.
- Remember to bring a leash for your pet and plastic bags to pick up your pet's waste.
- Learn about the areas you plan to visit. Read books, check online and talk to people before you go. The more you know, the more fun you'll have.

## Stick To Trails and Camp Overnight Right

- Walk and ride on designated trails to protect trailside plants.
- Avoid stepping on flowers or small trees. Once damaged, they may not grow back.
- Respect private property by staying on designated trails.
- Camp only on existing or designated campsites to avoid damaging vegetation.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Don't dig trenches or build structures in your campsite.



## Trash Your Trash and Pick Up Poop

- Pack it in, Pack it out. Put litter—even crumbs, peels and cores—in garbage bags and carry it home.
- Use bathrooms or outhouses when available. If not available, bury human waste in a small hole 6-8 inches deep and 200 feet or 70 big steps from water.
- Use a plastic bag to pack out your pet's poop to a garbage can.
- Keep water clean. Do not put soap, food, or human or pet waste in lakes or streams.

## Leave It As You Find It

- Leave plants, rocks and historical items as you find them so others can enjoy them.
- Treat living plants with respect. Carving, hacking or peeling plants may kill them.



## Be Careful With Fire

- Use a camp stove for cooking. Stoves are easier to cook on and create less impact than a fire.
- If you want to have a campfire, be sure it's permitted and safe to build a fire in the area you're visiting. Use only existing fire rings to protect the ground from heat. Keep your fire small.
- Remember, a campfire isn't a garbage can. Pack out all trash and food.
- Before gathering any firewood, check local regulations.
- Burn all wood to ash and be sure the fire is completely out and cold before you leave.

## Keep Wildlife Wild

- Observe wildlife from a distance and never approach, feed or follow them.
- Human food is unhealthy for all wildlife and feeding them starts bad habits.
- Protect wildlife and your food by securely storing your meals and trash.



## Share Our Trails and Manage Your Pet

- Be considerate when passing others on the trail.
- Keep your pet under control to protect it, other visitors and wildlife.
- Listen to nature. Avoid making loud noises or yelling. You will see more wildlife if you are quiet.
- Be sure the fun you have outdoors does not bother anyone else. Remember, other visitors are there to enjoy the outdoors too.



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The member-driven Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics teaches people of all ages how to enjoy the outdoors responsibly. In its simplest form, Leave No Trace is about making good decisions to protect the world around you—the world we all enjoy. Through targeted education, research and outreach, the Center ensures the long-term health of our natural world. Do your part to pass our nation's outdoor heritage on to future generations by joining us at [www.LNT.org](http://www.LNT.org).

Special thanks to  SUBARU for the printing of this poster.









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## HONDA ANNOUNCES OFF-ROAD CENTRIC PASSPORT TRAILSport FOR 2026 MODEL YEAR

Completely reimagined around a “Born Wild” concept fusing form and function, the all-new 2026 Honda Passport and Passport TrailSport represent the ultimate Honda adventure SUV with true rugged design, authentic off-road capability, next-level versatility and exceptional on-road performance. Starting in the mid-\$40,000s, the fourth-generation Passport will arrive by mid-2025 with a new TrailSport and TrailSport Elite variant.

The new Passport TrailSport is the most off-road capable Honda SUV ever, with standard rugged features, including off-road tuned suspension, expanded all-wheel drive system capabilities, robust steel skid plates, bright orange heavy-duty recovery hooks, specially engineered all-terrain tires and more to get weekend adventurers even farther down the trail or up the mountain.

“Our completely redesigned Passport redefines Honda rugged design and capability with tough new styling and substantially increased off-road performance for fun adventures without losing its everyday ride comfort,” said Jessica Lauder milk, assistant vice president of Honda National Auto Sales. “We top that off with the new Passport TrailSport, a new halo off-road vehicle that is the ultimate validation of our TrailSport concept, created to fully express Honda rugged design and capability.”

You can read all the details about this exciting update to Honda’s softlander by scanning the QR Code or visiting the News section at [www.outdoorx4.com](http://www.outdoorx4.com). **X4**





# FORD ANNOUNCES REDESIGNED EXPEDITION



Ford has announced the latest iteration of their venerable Expedition line-up with a design not only to get families where they need to go, but also to be a fundamental part of the experience once they arrive.

Available as either standard-wheelbase Expedition or extended-length Expedition MAX, the fifth-generation Expedition delivers the things customers expect, such as comfort, roominess and connectivity

and is improved with modern design, better cargo storage and a reimagined cabin experience that gives everyone access to technology and power.

"For Expedition customers, family is at the center of everything they do," said Trevor Scott, general manager of Ford Utilities. "We spent more than 1,100 hours talking with customers about their everyday lives. And with those insights we've rethought and redesigned Expedition to help customers make the most of their precious time with family and to make life easier – before, during and after every trip they make."

We have all the details and you can read them by scanning the QR code or visiting the News section at [www.outdoorx4.com](http://www.outdoorx4.com).





## YAKIMA EXPANDS PRODUCT LINE-UP FOR 2025

During the most recent SEMA Show held annually in Las Vegas, highlighting the automotive world's newest products and custom builds, Yakima highlighted a variety of vehicle-based adventure products across their line-up to be available by mid-Spring 2025.

While the roof top tent market has admittedly become highly saturated, their new SkyPeak HD hardshell tent is one to consider. Capable of shouldering up to 300lbs of gear up top even when deployed, the SkyPeak HD offers a quick clamshell pop-open mechanism that opens in a matter of seconds that's also four-season rated, waterproof and incorporates a premium memory foam mattress for restful sleep.

Additionally, a new SkyBox line-up offers a variety of size options to store your gear atop your roof rack that's waterproof, relatively lightweight, and easy to access.

For those like us who enjoy adventures on two-wheels, the new StageTwo bike rack raises the bar with a suite of new features that allow for the rack to handle bikes weighing up to 70lbs. across wheel sizes from 16"-29" and up to 5" wide tires. An optimized pivot geometry makes it easy to lower and raise the rack with improved tailgate clearance. The OnRamp LX rack is a hitch-mounted bike rack designed specifically to handle e-bikes with an integrated ramp to allow for easier loading. The OnRamp LX can accommodate wheelbases from 34" to 54" and tires up to 29", supporting up to 80lbs per bike on-road and 48lbs off-road.

OutdoorX4 plans to use and review a variety of these, as well as other products not highlighted here, once they're available. In the meantime, learn more by visiting [www.yakima.com](http://www.yakima.com) or by scanning the QR code. **X4**





# BACKCOUNTRY DISCOVERY ROUTES ANNOUNCES NEW BIG BEND BDR-X ROUTE



The Big Bend BDR-X is the latest addition to BDR's lineup of X routes, which are "shorter BDR-style routes that loop", tailored for dual-sport and adventure motorcycle travel. Set against the rugged landscape of west Texas in the largest protected portion of the Chihuahuan

Desert in the United States, and within the unique backdrop of the Rio Grande river, this route stands out as a premier destination for adventurous riders seeking a remote and unforgettable journey.

Spanning 618 miles, this route weaves through the iconic terrain of Big Bend National Park, Big Bend Ranch State Park, and other remote wilderness, offering a unique off-pavement adventure. Riders

can explore the untamed beauty of the Chisos Mountains, encounter hidden historical gems, experience vibrant artistic communities, and even venture into Mexico with an optional foot crossing.

Learn more and watch the feature Documentary film by scanning the QR code or visiting the News section at [www.outdoorx4.com](http://www.outdoorx4.com). **X4**



## MEANWHILE, OVER ON OUTDOORX4.COM...



### The El Camino

OutdoorX4's Contributing Editor, Michael Holland, describes the inhospitable beauty of the Sonoran Desert while traveling the Devil's Highway along the U.S./Mexico border in southern Arizona.



### Staying Connected

Satellite communication devices are revolutionizing the way people experience remote travel.

As OutdoorX4 Contributing Editor, Jack Shaw explains, technology keeps improving and as the demand for wireless communication increases, the capabilities of satellite communication devices are expected to fundamentally transform travel, providing connectivity, safety and convenience when you're home away from home.



### Built for No Roads

Utah's backcountry in mid-August can be tricky. Temperatures during the day can be relatively warm and moreso, afternoon showers at elevation can leave areas soaked for days. Still, Utah is a haven for exploration and one of the finest places

to explore in the lower 48, and it was the perfect setting to test the mettle of Royal Enfield's newest generation Himalayan... even if Mother Nature didn't cooperate.

Check out these stories and more by visiting [www.outdoorx4.com/stories](http://www.outdoorx4.com/stories) or by scanning the QR codes above. Also, be sure to sign-up for our eNewsletters in the section at the bottom at [www.outdoorx4.com](http://www.outdoorx4.com) or scan the QR code to get the latest news, features, tips, reviews, and issue release updates straight to your inbox! **X4**







## FORD MAVERICK TREMOR



When Ford announced the resurrection of the Maverick nameplate, a curiosity ensued as to whether the new iteration would continue with an identity crisis as the Mustang's stepchild or instead morph into something else entirely. Upon its debut, the Maverick indeed pivoted into an unexpected iteration, that of baby sibling to the Ranger, a truck who just a few years earlier had made its triumphant return and breathed new life into the mid-sized truck segment dominated at the time by Toyota's Tacoma. Now, after several years of the Maverick wading through another identity crisis – is it a small truck or a car with a truck bed – Ford has expanded its Tremor line-up to deliver a small-sized truck with a mid-sized appetite.

Over the course of one week driving and testing the Ford Maverick Tremor in a myriad of conditions, including as a tow vehicle for a project trailer we had recently acquired, the truck's mettle is underappreciated. Highlighted by a host of off-road enhancements including a rear differential locker I found to be highly valuable given the truck's limited suspension travel, the Maverick Tremor also features a high clearance front bumper, a factory

suspension lift providing 9.4" of ground clearance along with a steel skidplate. The Maverick Tremor is oriented to handle light-duty off-road adventures to destinations off the beaten path but not overly challenging terrain as, again, its suspension travel and articulation are limited.

The truck features a 2.0L EcoBoost powertrain offering a strong 250hp and 277 lb.-ft of torque, perfectly capable and adequate for its size. I averaged approximately 23mpg in mixed driving and found the seats comfortable for around town driving or long stretches of highway pavement. While the steering does feel a bit heavy, at least compared to its larger sibling, Ranger, it's not exhausting.

Compared to its nearest competitor, Honda's Ridgeline, this iteration of the Maverick is an exceptional choice. It's nowhere near as heavy or large as many of the vehicles being used for overland-style travel yet does an excellent job when challenging terrain isn't the objective. Plus, at \$34k it's attainable and that's something most wallets can appreciate. **X4**



## Bruce Smith Never Leaves Home Without His CAMERA GEAR

With over 30 years of experience capturing the world around him as a photog, Bruce's Nikon cameras are his bread-and-butter tool, and he feels naked without one in-hand.

Right now, Bruce has a Nikon Z6IIs and D750s, with an array of lenses from 10mm-300mm and stores them in his 15-year-old Lowe Pro Slingshot 302 backpack camera bag. His Bedbug TrackMat folding pad proves useful when he kneels on gravel, snow or varied terrain while in the field.

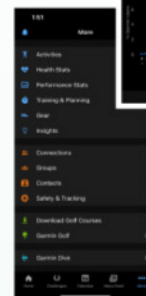
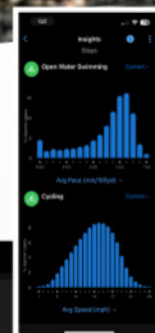


what WE dig

## GARMIN'S INSTINCT 2 SOLAR TACTICAL is the Everyday Timepiece for OutdoorX4's Editor

A rugged timepiece is a highly useful piece of gear while exploring by foot, on two-wheels or in your four-wheeled steed. If you can also get a variety of uses that can actually help inspire yourself to set benchmarks for your health...well, that's a win-win!

Garmin's Instinct 2 Solar Tactical watch has become a tool of choice for OutdoorX4's Editor & Publisher, Frank Ledwell. He uses it daily, having taken it to the Himalayan Mountains in 2023 for several days of motorcycle riding at elevation as well as tracking his fitness while competing in regional tennis tournaments or burning calories in Taekwondo class as a second-degree black belt. When paired to Garmin's Connect App, the incorporated minicomputer within the watch provides critical health statistics in a report format that helps to set benchmarks based on age, weight, and overall age fitness. And, the rugged GPS functionality not only keeps you in the know as to where you are, anywhere in the world, but the integrated solar charging capability in the watch's face provides daytime charging without having to be plugged in which is the whole point of getting out and away.



## Bill's GORILLA is Always on His Travels

To me travel means camping and camping means sitting around a fire at night enjoying the moment. And where there's a fire there has to be a BBQ grill (or griddle, depending on where you live) which I use most nights to cook our dinner. My grill, is nicknamed the Gorilla, has travelled across Australia, the US and around the never leave on a trip without it – I pack pack my toothbrush!



## Eric Arnold Always Carries His CANON R6 MARK II CAMERA

This mirrorless camera body, paired with my favorite lens (Canon 24-70mm f2.8 L II) is packed with all the latest technology from Canon. As a working professional, I rely on my gear to never let me down, and even in the summer heat and winter cold, this combo has met the challenge.



## THE LAST OVERLAND

Review by Charles Bell



*The Last Overland* by Alex Bescoby is a fun and entertaining adventure that takes place in a 1955 Land Rover Series 1, one of two original Land Rovers to make the epic journey from London to Singapore back in 1955. Bescoby takes us along with his team as they "continue" the journey the *The First Overland* accom-

plished in 1955 when six students from Oxford and Cambridge became the first group of adventurers to successfully drive from London to Singapore over land. The two vehicles were brand new Land Rovers painted in Oxford and Cambridge colors. That original story can be read in *The First Overland* by Tim Slessor.

Bescoby's book opens 60 plus years later. The Cambridge Land Rover has disappeared. The Oxford Land Rover was lost for decades, found in derelict condition by a Yorkshireman, and put back together. Now, Alex Bescoby is tasked with driving the original 1955 Oxford Land Rover from Singapore to London. Also, Tim Slessor himself intends to make the journey with the team. It's a well written story highlighting every human emotion as the team

## KICKIN' BACK



travels 12,200 miles across 23 countries. Bescoby does a wonderful job connecting history and adventure while also pointing out how so many things have changed, as well as what has remained unaltered. And, since they are driving a 1955 Land Rover, there are a few entertaining mishaps along the way. It's a well-written story of travel and adventure, and there's even an exciting twist I won't share here you'll have to read when you pick up a copy.

I encourage anyone who's passionate about adventure travel to read *The Last Overland* by Alex Bescoby, as well as *The First Overland* by Tim Slessor. However, I will warn you: it may cause you to want to go on an adventure of your own. **X4**





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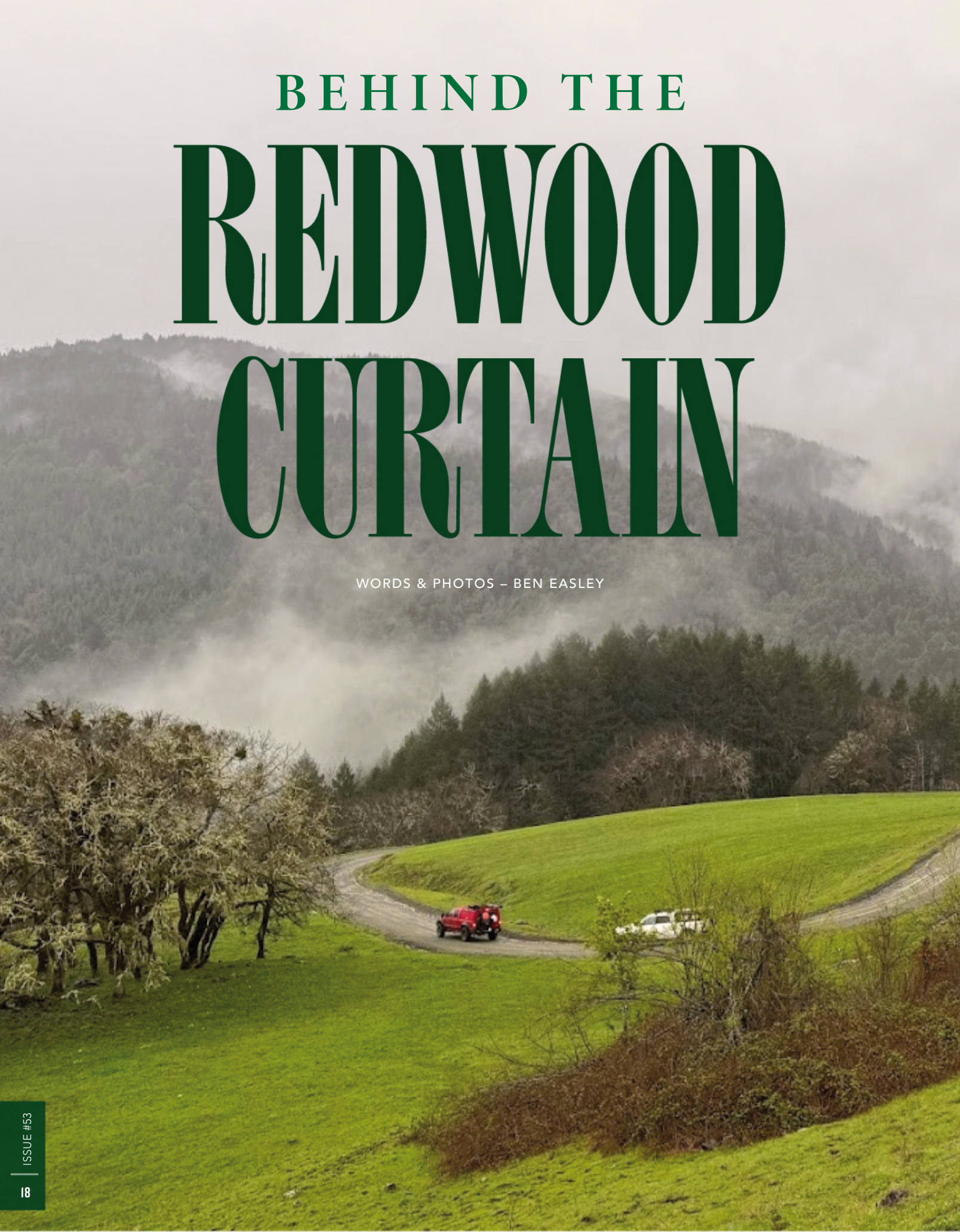


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# BEHIND THE REDWOOD CURTAIN

WORDS & PHOTOS – BEN EASLEY







# *“These kings of the forest, the noblest of a noble race...”*

That's how John Muir once referred to the coast redwoods of central and northern California. Growing to nearly 400 feet in height and clinging to a narrow band of coastline from southern Oregon to Big Sur, only 5% of the original old-growth redwood forest remains. Renowned for their record-breaking height, coast redwoods are also some of the largest and oldest trees on earth. Reputed big tree hunters like Mario Vaden and Cal Poly Humboldt's Stephen Sillett, Ph.D., now believe there are living coast redwoods larger than their giant sequoia cousins in the Sierra Nevada. Historical evidence supports their claims, as the official measurements of the Crannell Creek Giant (felled 1905) easily exceed the total volume of the record-setting General Sherman tree by 17% to 25%.

The tallest and largest trees can be found in far northern California among the remaining old-growth forests of Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino counties. Upon leaving the sun-draped hills and vineyards of Sonoma County, the redwood coast creates a brooding and impressive presence. The wet season typically arrives by mid-fall, and it's not uncommon for the rains to continue into June. While the wine country may be basking in 90-degree temperatures in June, the redwood coast may be experiencing torrential downpours. When the wet season gives way to the dry summer months, redwoods get their water from the air, receiving up to 40% of their annual water intake from fog!

Locals have long referred to the region as the Redwood Curtain, named for how the dense, towering forests seem to isolate this area from the rest of the state. The people who live here are often seen as quirky and fiercely independent, thriving in this mist-shrouded, secluded landscape.

## GIANTS OF THE NORTH STATE

Crescent City is a hard-knock, blue-collar town where fishing remains a vital industry. Beyond the rusted boats and crab pots lies the ominous redwood forest. Hills and mountains of seemingly endless conifers stretch for miles in all directions. The Redwood Coast Adventure Trail, a 472-mile overland track developed by Overland Trail Guides starts out with a bang on its northern end. Our group of five rigs embarked on the RedCAT by traveling Howland Hill Road, a 10-mile dirt road through some of the most awe-inspiring old-growth forests in the North State region. For those willing to venture on foot, the short hikes to Stout Grove or the newly accessible Grove of Titans are well worth the effort. We made the 1.5-mile hike to the latter along a metal-grated boardwalk. The grove features four of the 10 largest known coast redwoods on earth. With names like Lost Monarch, Screaming Titans, and Chesty Puller, it's hard to resist the appeal of visiting this majestic grove.

A few miles down the road from Howland Hill lies Forks of Smith, where the south fork of the Smith River converges with the main fork. This often-overlooked spot is one of the hidden gems of the Redwood Coast. A five-minute hike leads visitors to a rocky point where the forks meet. The Smith is renowned for its clear, emerald waters and is said to have some of the cleanest water in the Lower 48. Leaving the Smith behind, our group ventured deeper into the mountains of the Smith River National Recreation Area, taking in the views of the Del Norte coastline and rugged Klamath Mountains to the east. From here, our group would head south along Highway 101 to Gold Bluffs







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**TEMBO TUSK**





Beach to camp for the night. Before we reached the beach, we stopped to snap photos with Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe at Trees of Mystery and drove the short five-mile gravel loop of Coastal Drive, which features impressive views of the Klamath River mouth. If you're lucky, you may catch members of the Yurok tribe spearfishing or smoking salmon along the banks of the mighty Klamath, a sacred waterway to local indigenous people since time immemorial.

Gold Bluffs Beach campground, a quaint area that sits between the dunes of the beach and the bluff for which it's named, is easily one of my favorite developed campgrounds in California. For whatever reason, this section of coastline seems to be drenched in sunshine when much of the coast to the north and south is enveloped in a dense layer of fog, and it was no different for this trip. There's nothing quite like falling asleep to the sound of the crashing surf in the distance.

## FROM SURF TO SNOWDRIFTS

The following day, we awoke bright and early with plans to drive through Prairie Creek Redwoods, Redwood National Park, and then Hoopa tribal lands on our way to camp. We departed Gold Bluffs with the California sunshine on our backs, a bit of an oddity given the number of storms that continued to pound the North State in the first week of spring. On our way to hike the trail to "Big Tree," a small herd of Roosevelt Elk congregated at a popular viewing spot in Prairie Creek Redwoods. Weighing up to 1,200 pounds each, we reveled at the magnificent beasts that once numbered in the hundreds of thousands in the dense forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Like many of the state parks along the Redwood Coast, Prairie Creek is filled with a number of fantastic hiking opportunities, with the Fern Creek trail being its most popular. Unfortunately, the gate leading to the trailhead was closed, so we opted to make the short hike to Big Tree, a mammoth redwood that's nearly 24 feet in diameter!

Back in our vehicles, we began the ascent up Bald Hills Road (Redwood National Park), stopping for lunch just below Schoolhouse Peak. We ate lunch as the wind howled over the ridgetop. A five-minute hike to the top of Schoolhouse Peak reveals an old fire lookout and impressive views of the snow-capped Coastal Range and Klamath Mountains if the conditions are right.

We pushed beyond the boundaries of Redwood National Park and into Hoopa tribal lands. The desolate forest roads that followed Bald Hills Road seemed empty. Clouds crept in, and the sunshine was soon muted by gray skies. That's when we hit our first deadfall. I was able to easily clear the first few downed trees, but they grew more frequent and larger in size. We finally encountered a tree so precariously slid downslope that it ate into our planned travel time.









After 90 minutes of winching and chainsaw work, the stubborn tan oak was cleared from the road. A few miles from camp, we hit our first patch of snow at just over 3,000 feet in elevation. Apparently, a recent storm from the Gulf of Alaska had dumped several feet of snow on these mountain roads that typically only see a dusting or two during the winter months. The snow grew deeper, and I eventually found my truck high-centered. After drastically airing down the tires and some quick winching, I was free and on the move, only to encounter several more snowdrifts that grew increasingly deeper. Short on daylight, we regrouped and determined the best way to get to camp would be to reroute through the town of Hoopa and up and over Bair Road, a well-traveled dirt road connecting Hoopa to the Eureka area. The reroute paid off quickly as we were at our campsite within 45 minutes of turning around.

## HERE COMES THE RAIN

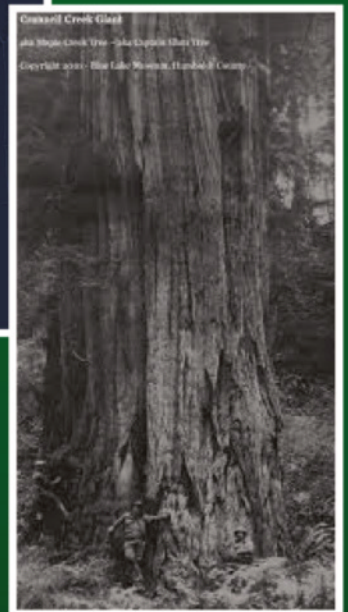
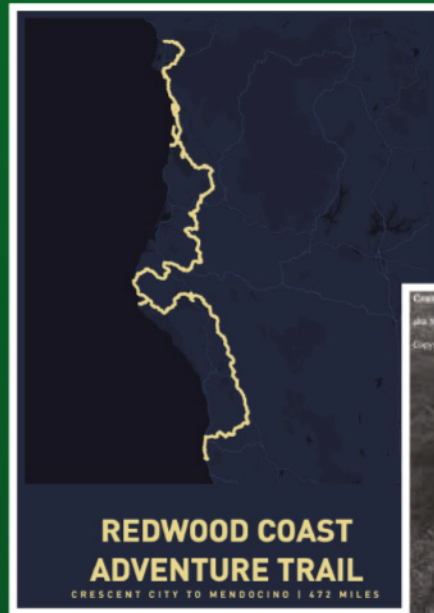
We awoke the next morning to the sound of light rain. By the time we'd packed camp, precipitation had transformed into a torrent of water falling from the sky. We hurried away in our iron stagecoaches, climbing into the mist-covered slopes of Humboldt County. Our day started with exploring the old dirt ranch roads of the Kneeland area, one of the original cattle and sheep farming regions of the North State. If you ever get the chance to visit the backroads of Humboldt and Mendocino counties during springtime, you're in for quite the treat. Even under gray skies and rain, the oak-studded green hills contrasting with the evergreen forest create a breathtaking landscape. You might find yourself pinching yourself, wondering if you've wandered onto a Lord of the Rings movie set. After four hours of solid rain, we made a beeline into Fortuna to dry off and for a warm bite at Eel River Brewing Company.

Peering out the windows of the brewery, we saw the clouds beginning to break. We were off to the Lost Coast, a famed slice of California coastline that's experienced little development since the arrival of settlers nearly 200 years ago. Rays of sunshine crept in as we climbed the dirt of Bear River Ridge, which ends at Mattole Road, a spectacular stretch of pockmarked pavement along the Lost Coast featuring some of the most impressive coastal views in the Lower 48. After reaching the coastal hamlet of Petrolia, Mattole Road turns inland. Scattered showers greeted us as we arrived at the local county park. On the other side of our camp, the banks of the normally clear Mattole River swelled a milky brown. It turned out that we were the only ones crazy enough to endure the inclement weather. As the evening turned to nightfall, the rain showers transformed from intermittent to non-stop.





# Redwood Coast Adventure Trail aka RedCAT



The Redwood Coast Adventure Trail is a 472-mile-long overland track developed by Overland Trail Guides. Running north to south from Crescent City to the seaside village of Mendocino, the route visits many of the well-known California state and national parks along the way, but it also navigates through the lesser traveled dirt backroads of the Redwood Coast familiar only to locals. The route is accessible to 4x4s and AWD vehicles of all sizes.

For more information  
about the RedCAT, visit:

[WWW.OVERLANDTRAILGUIDES.COM](http://WWW.OVERLANDTRAILGUIDES.COM).



## PARTY OF ONE

After 12-plus hours of steady rainfall, our group of five rigs was down to two. Three of the guys in our group decided to head home rather than endure another day of rain. Our now two-truck convoy maneuvered along the wet roads of the Mattole River Valley, climbing over the high point and dropping into Humboldt Redwoods State Park. Whenever I visit Humboldt Redwoods, I try to hit the Bull Creek Flats forest, the densest known biomass on earth. It also contains the largest concentration of 350-foot-tall trees on earth. Having the forest to yourself amid the fog and light rain is a spiritual experience that's hard to replicate. From Humboldt Redwoods, we traveled through the heart of the Emerald Triangle, where the domestic marijuana industry gained a foothold in California back in the 1970s. We traversed the dense forests of Dyerville Loop, bringing us to the higher elevations along Bell Springs Road. Climbing higher into the clouds, our visibility was limited to less than a half mile, but like the stretches of road near Kneeland and Bear River Ridge, the scenery was awe-inspiring.

The dirt of Bell Springs intersects with Highway 101 just north of Laytonville. In town, I said goodbye to the fourth departing member of the group. Now it was just me and my trusty dog, Shasta. We followed the highway until it led us to Jackson Demonstration Forest. The big blue Ram maneuvered through the tight and twisty dirt roads of the redwood forest, eventually spilling onto Highway 1. Strangely enough, the clouds remained, but there was no rain. We made the quick loop around the seaside village of Mendocino before jumping across the highway to Big River Beach, the official end of the route. Shasta playfully galloped along the sand, proudly puffing her chest out. To say we were content with our journey would be quite the understatement! **X4**

### BEN EASLEY

#### AUTHOR BIO



A lifelong northern California resident, Ben founded Overland Trail Guides shortly after completing his MBA in 2019. Since an adolescent, he's enjoyed exploring trails and getting lost in the woods, whether on a mountain bike, on foot, or by 4x4. You can find Ben exploring the backroads throughout the West with his 9-year-old son, and the family dog, Shasta, The Adventure Shepsky.

Ben doesn't need much to stay happy on the open road. Usually a cold six pack, a classic Steinbeck novel, and a warm fire at a campsite far away from the crowds does the job!





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# Follow the Sun

WORDS & PHOTOS – BILL LAWLER





## *I confidently inched Tramp down the dirt slope*

and onto the pebbly shoreline after scouting my path by foot to ensure our big truck camper could safely make the beach for the night. The sun sat low on the horizon across the Black Sea, and the setting looked perfect for another beautiful camping spot. But I was only fifteen feet into the pebbles when the wheels started spinning. Within seconds, Tramp was completely bogged up to his axles. We were seriously stuck on a remote beach in northern Türkiye. How were we going to get out of this one?

Perhaps more to the point is how did a couple in their mid-60s from Sydney, Australia, driving a big American Ford F-250 with a pop-up camper end up in this diabolical situation? Well, we'll need to go back more than 30 years when Julie and I came up with a plan (to be honest, it was more my plan, but Julie faithfully went along with it) to retire early, buy a camper, and drive around the world. It sounded so easy back then, naively glib, just say it, and it will magically happen. But over the years, through our careers, three children, two grandchildren, and a lifetime of travel, we kept to our original, fantastical goal and eventually gave it a name: Follow the Sun.

Our Follow the Sun journey had a simple, high-level plan. Over a three-year period, we would drive six months around North America during its summer, then drive six months around South America during its summer, ship our vehicle and drive six months around Europe during its summer, then another six months around southern Africa during its summer, then another six months around Asia in its summer, and finish with six months around Australia during its summer. So, when we sketched it out on the whiteboard, our plan was to have six summers in a row—wouldn't that be great! Well, it didn't quite work out that way.

I was born in Arizona and grew up in California where I still have substantial family ties. Julie grew up in the southern beach suburbs of Sydney, Australia. We met in 1980 while separately working and travelling in Europe, and after spending some years living there, we decided it was finally time to move on. Being from two different countries, we had to decide where we were going to settle down. I lost the toss of the coin, and we boarded a flight to Sydney.

Jump forward to a sunny California morning in March 2017. In the driveway of my family home, Julie and I had final teary hugs from our farewell party before departing on what turned out to be an epic six-and-a-half-year journey across five continents and through 70 countries.

The third member of our team was Tramp, our truck camper that became our home, our transport, our security, and our best friend. Our original ride was a Chevy Colorado with a very slick pop-up camper made by a company in northern California. But as we learned the hard (and expensive) way, the Colorado was too small to carry the camper. After a couple of blown rear differentials on the rough roads in the Yukon and Alaska, we







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upgraded. The brand new four-door F-250, with its 6.2-litre gas engine, turned out to be the perfect solution and easily carried our camper, our gear, and ourselves around the world for the rest of the journey. Without the reliable Tramp as our partner, we never could have completed our odyssey.

We spent about nine months travelling counterclockwise around the U.S.'s lower 48, Canada and Alaska, avoiding large cities, camping in state parks or wherever we could find a private place, moving between beaches and mountains on whatever whim might strike us along the way. We had a list of places we wanted to visit that we had compiled over the previous three decades, including national parks, UNESCO World Heritage locations, historical or geographic points of interests, and places we had read or heard about.

However, it was often the unexpected places, the accidental discoveries, that were the most rewarding. We loved the maritime provinces of eastern Canada and used their northernmost roads to traverse the country all the way to the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. We spent almost two months in Alaska, finding that this beautiful and wild place with so few people and so much nature was exactly what we loved most in our travels. We vowed to return to Alaska as soon as possible.

We drove down Mexico's Baja Peninsula, enjoying a Christmas on a hidden beach there, and traversed the country to Cancun, where we caught a plane to Havana for eight days of exploring the fascinating country of Cuba. We slowly made our way down through Central America, zig-zagging through each country, taking in their unique cultures and histories. We loved Central America, from the volcanoes of Guatemala and the black beaches of El Salvador, to the national parks of Costa Rica and the canal in Panama.

We put Tramp on a ship for his short trip from Panama to Cartagena, Colombia, and worked our way down the Andes, diving into the ancient cultures of Peru—especially the famous site of Machu Picchu—and the immense salt flats of Bolivia. Chile had a little bit of everything, and we eventually made our way into Argentina and literally drove to the end of the road. In doing so, we had completed one of the longest drives in the world—from Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean in Alaska all the way south to Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost town in South America. That's over 25,000 miles of adventure!

We shipped Tramp from Montevideo, Uruguay, to Antwerp, Belgium, and began the third continent of Follow the Sun. Due to 90-day visa limitations for visitors to most of Europe, we strategized how best to use this limited time. We decided to focus on places we hadn't been to before and did a wonderful loop up through the Scandinavian countries, including standing at Nordkapp, the northernmost point of Europe, and dipping into Russia for nine days (this was in mid-2018, a few years before their invasion of Ukraine).





# Our Secrets to Long-Term Travel

Long term lifestyle travel is much different than going away for a short break and requires a completely different frame of mind. A good place to start is the old adage – take half the clothes and twice the money. Here's a few other suggestions we have to get the most out of any trip.



- **Have courage** – the world is full of wonderful and friendly people
- **Be curious** – we travel to expand our knowledge experience and cultural awareness
- **Be flexible** – every day will throw up surprises, challenges and opportunities
- **Find your own pace** – spend days on a beach or go for long walks – it's not all about the driving
- **You can't see everything (but you can try!)**
- **Stamina** – it's a marathon out there so find your own groove and prepare your body (OutdoorX4's [Getting Fit for Overland Adventure](#) article is a good start for fitness)
- **Compatibility** – Work through differences quickly
- **There are good days and bad days – support each other**
- **Create private time and private space** – everyone needs to get away a little bit
- **You can't control the weather so embrace whatever you're served up**

We also drove down to the Iberian Peninsula and spent extended time in Spain and Portugal, focusing on their rich histories and wonderful beaches.

After spending Christmas that year with family in Sydney, we shipped the seafaring Tramp again, this time from the United Kingdom to Durban, South Africa. We met him again at the Port of Durban and headed off to explore what we later agreed was our favourite continent of the journey. Africa is such a rich and rewarding place for adventurous travellers that each country deserves its own story.

We focused on the continent's nine southernmost countries and tried to hit as many game parks, wild beaches, high mountains, and stark deserts we could find. Our highlights, admittedly from a long list, included the animals of Kruger National Park, the wildness of Mozambique, the crystalline waters of Lake Malawi, the mountains of Zambia, the majesty of Victoria Falls, Chobe National Park in Botswana, and the remote deserts of Namibia.

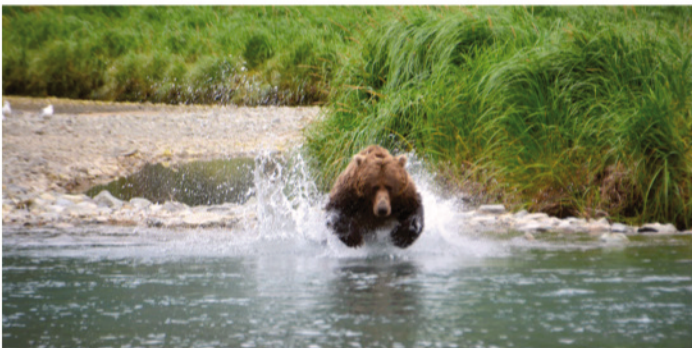
Africa has so many different faces that it's impossible to take it all in. But perhaps the one aspect we loved the most was the wild animals that roam this continent. Yes, we saw the Big Five, as they're called—the lion, leopard, rhinoceros, elephant, and Cape buffalo. Since we traveled from coast to coast, though, we were able to see a wide array of amazing animals, some of which are quite rare, like the wild dogs, black rhinos and cheetahs. Our highlight might have been in Chobe National Park when we found a leopard guarding his kill high up on a tree branch.

We reluctantly shipped Tramp back to the United Kingdom and were about to embark on the next continent of our journey when news came of the impending arrival of another grandchild. Hold the fort, drop everything, we're going home to bask in the wonders of a new baby girl entering this world. Travel can wait.

Ah, well, yes and no. Within months, the COVID-19 pandemic had spread across the world, and Australia took a very strict approach to controlling this beast. We were literally trapped in our home country for a couple of years while Tramp safely rested in storage in the U.K. In 2022, we were finally able to travel again. We sprung Tramp from his cage and spent several months exploring Ireland, Scotland, England and Iceland. The latter proved to be another major highlight of our trip—a wonderful mix of unpronounceable volcanoes, huge glaciers, remote beaches, friendly people, terrible weather, and interesting food. We loved Iceland!

In 2023, we were ready to complete our Follow the Sun journey and drive from the U.K. across Europe, into Central Asia, and all the way to the Pacific Ocean. By that point, though, the world had changed. Russia and Iran were no-go zones, and there were still a few countries—most importantly, Azerbaijan—that were still closed to travellers due to the pandemic. Never mind, we're flexible, and we devised a plan to explore as much of western Asia as we could.







We crossed into Türkiye from Greece and extensively explored that wonderful country, as well as doing a fabulous loop through the little-known countries of Armenia and Georgia. We had travelled as far east as we could go and turned around to go back to Europe to visit the fascinating countries of Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Hungary. We finally shipped Tramp for the last time to Baltimore, where we completed our final leg of our journey—a trip along the northern U.S., including spending late fall exploring the Great Lakes area, the Dakotas and Wyoming.

By the time we returned to my family home in California, we had travelled an amazing 755 days in Tramp and covered 105,000 miles. In all, we visited 70 countries, never had a major health issue, car accident, or run-in with local police (although we did have to pay two bribes that we managed to negotiate substantially down), and we had a wonderful 40th wedding anniversary in Istanbul, Türkiye.

And speaking of Türkiye, how did we get ourselves out of the mess on that Black Sea beach? As was often the case whenever we had a problem or needed help, the locals came to our rescue. A young son and his father came upon us, and the young fellow spoke a little English. They called a friend who knew a friend who had a huge earthmoving bulldozer who was happy to come down to the beach and pull us out of the deep trouble I had driven into. Greatly relieved and forever grateful, we were then invited to the family home for tea (of course!) and to meet their extended family. Türkiye was already one of our favourite countries on the trip, and this episode confirmed it.

From all the people we have spoken to or corresponded with about our journey, including the thousands who followed us on our blog, we seem to get three main questions. Almost always the first is, “What was your favourite place?” This is a very broad and complex question. Amongst all the wonderful experiences we had every day, however, Julie and I do have one episode that stands out above all others. From the picturesque southern port town of Homer, Alaska (the Halibut Fishing Capital of the World), we caught a two-day ferry to the little community of Kodiak on Kodiak Island. From there, we broke the piggy bank and chartered a sea plane that flew us to a quiet little bay in Katmai National Park. We walked ashore with an armed guide, and for two hours stood amongst dozens of brown bears, some with their cubs, as they fished for salmon that were making their way up a small stream. It was the most extraordinary experience to be standing only metres away from and witnessing these magnificent creatures going about their daily activities in such a remote place.

The second question we often get is some variation of “Did you have any safety issues or problems?” And the resounding answer is—NO! Not once did we have any problem with people bothering us, stealing from us, threatening us, or in any way endangering us. In fact, we experienced quite the opposite. Almost everyone we encountered were friendly, curious, help-



## Our Home on Wheels

When Julie and I started to get serious about planning our around the world journey we did a stack of research and considered countless options. Every choice you make is a compromise of some sort – such as, more comfort and space come at a higher cost. We identified four key factors that drove our decision on almost everything – size, comfort, special features and cost. What tradeoffs between these decision points were we prepared to make?

One thing was non-negotiable – we wanted a hard-shell pop-up, not something with canvas or other soft material. This was mainly for safety but also for temperature control and to provide a more comfortable solution in rain and wind. Because our camper cab-over space wouldn't fit over the cab of a larger truck, we started with a Chevy Colorado. The Colorado was a great little truck which we loved driving but the camper was much too heavy, even after installing a top-of-the-line Icon suspension system, air bags and adding two extra leaves to our rear suspension.

The rough dirt roads in the Yukon and Alaska took their toll and not once but twice we blew out the rear diffs, in addition to numerous flat tires. Eventually we limped back to California and the camper company agreed to install a four-inch lift kit on the flatbed which allowed the camper to fit over the cab of our new four door Ford F250 Super Duty 6.2L gas truck. Now we were styling! We called our home on wheels Tramp, a mash between travel and camp.

The custom-made tray provides substantial storage on all corners and the four inch lift kit also opens up with a large cavity for extra storage space. We travelled with two MAXTRAX boards which had frequent hard workouts, three Rotopax four-gallon gas containers and one Rotopax two-gallon diesel container for our diesel cooker and heater. Carrying the extra gas meant Tramp had a range of around 600 miles on good roads.

Considering we drove Tramp over 105,000 miles, sometimes on diabolical roads and lived in the camper for 755 days, we think we made good choices and were very happy with the outcome. If we did it all again, we would drop the hydraulic lift system and upgrade the diesel cooker but otherwise we nailed it!





ful and generous—even if it was only with a smile and a wave. People living in mud huts with almost nothing to their name would come up to us, shake our hands, ask us where we were from, and admire Tramp. One of our biggest lessons from this trip is that the world is full of truly wonderful, friendly people if we only just meet them halfway.

And the third question is usually something like this: “How did the two of you get along in such tight confines for so long?” Well, to be honest, we did have the occasional trying moment, but we learned to allow the other to have their say and then quickly push that issue behind us and look out the front window for the next moment in our adventure.

Along the way, we also proved that long distance overland travel is not just for younger, stronger, YouTube-friendly people. We are in our mid (now late)-60s with a lifetime of experiences and travel knowledge, and I think our age actually helped us through some of our more challenging situations.

Julie and I are always happy to share the three secrets to our success. First, you need stamina to travel day after day, in good weather and bad, and through one experience after another, no escaping the joys and toils of travel. Second, you need endless curiosity to explore new places, to have new experiences, and to meet new people. And finally, you must have compatibility to work together as a team, to support each other, to share and care for the person next to you, and to play to each other’s strengths and be bigger and better for it.

We will always cherish our Follow the Sun journey, but we also hope we’ve inspired others to push their own personal boundaries, get out of their comfort zones, and try something different. Through this, we can all think more broadly, become a little wiser, and have more stories to tell. **X4**

## BILL LAWLER

AUTHOR BIO



Bill is an American and Australian dual national, having been raised in California but settling in Sydney Australia with his Australian wife Julie along with his three children, two grandchildren and a career in the travel technology industry.

Bill was introduced to the joys of travel by his parents at a young age and he has had a variety of epic adventures in many corners of the globe. In the late 1970’s he road a bus from London through the middle east, Pakistan and India en route to Kathmandu Nepal. In the early 1980’s he rode a truck from London across the Sahara Desert, through Africa to Johannesburg South Africa.

He and Julie have travelled extensively around Australia, to Antarctica and throughout southeast Asia when they lived in Bangkok for four years. Bill has lived in four countries and has visited over 130 countries, never tiring of finding new places and enjoying new experiences.

You can read more of Bill and Julie’s travels on their travel blog at **WWW.OURPANGAEA.NET.**



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# GEARING UP

*The History and How-To of Ural's World-Class Side Hack*



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**WORDS – BILL DRAGOO | PHOTOS – SUSAN DRAGOO**

*The 1960 BMW R60/2 is one of my favorite motorcycles of all time. It is simple, robust, easy to work on and it draws a crowd everywhere it goes. It embodies the essence of a motorcycle and its infectious personality is a quickly acquired blood-borne illness, a welcome affliction indeed.*





## *Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery*

The 2024 Ural Gear Up is a fair representation of my old BMW. Not surprising, actually, since the Ural's Russian makers "borrowed" its design from a late 1930s BMW R71. The Red Army needed an agile machine, durable enough to carry military loads and personnel quickly over rough terrain to answer the fast-paced warfare of Germany. So, in 1940 the Russian military under Joseph Stalin ordered the production of a new motorcycle based on the BMW. The Soviets purchased five R71s through a third party in Sweden and reverse engineered to replicate their enemy's somewhat balky but beautiful bike...um, trike, since it was designed to tote a sidecar.

Initially dubbed the M71, the early Ural's designation was soon upgraded to M72. The name "Ural" was adopted later, an appropriate moniker when the factory moved from Moscow to a brewery in the town of Irbit, tucked into the Ural Mountains on the edge of Siberia to escape the reach of German bombers. Almost 10,000 M72 motorcycles rolled out of the Irbit Motorcycle Factory (IMZ) for the war effort, and in 1953 IMZ began building civilian models. By the late 1950s military production had moved to Kyiv, Ukraine. Almost every component originated in the plant, from rubber bits, castings, frames and shocks to control cables, plastic pieces and brakes. Ultimately Ural employed some 10,000 workers, producing about 130,000 units annually. The Irbit facility began producing machines for the domestic market and became the only large-scale motorcycle manufacturer in the Soviet Union. The next forty years saw Ural motorcycles selling in Southeast Asia, India, and Western Europe. In 1994 the independent company Ural America set up shop for distribution in the U.S., which became their largest market. By 2023 Ural boasted 190 independent dealerships worldwide, including high-volume markets in Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan and the United Kingdom.

## *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang?*

Like the lovable rattletrap of the 1968 film, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, the Ural has always been a charming machine to ride but ownership required a deft wrench-hand and a willingness to put it to use by the side of the road. Almost any average mechanic could work on it, which was a blessing because Russian-built Urals were known to be unreliable, fussy and clunky in an old-truck kind of way. Castings were rough, gears loosely meshed, electrics were finicky and materials lacked the quality of modern machinery, especially compared to the Japanese motorcycles of the 1960s and beyond. Breakdowns were common, almost an accepted part of Ural ownership.















## *Constant, Never-Ending Improvement...*

...was not initially part of the Ural heritage but by the 21<sup>st</sup> century a focus on quality became necessary to survival. In 2006 Ural's corporate headquarters moved to Redmond, Washington. Quality has steadily improved and reliability is approaching modern expectations. Ural adopted electronic fuel injection in 2014 and five years later improved it for easier starting and to meet Euro 5 emission requirements. A two-year, unlimited mileage warranty adds value and owner confidence. Urals are now built in Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan, under great scrutiny. The Ural Gear Up's traditional 750cc 41 hp motor received completely new precision-machined castings in 2023, with a two-piece front bearing housing and rubber gaskets in critical areas where leaks were prevalent in older models. Roller lifters replaced the original flat tappet design of old, extending cam life and lengthening valve adjustment intervals. Brembo brakes now bind all three wheels, adjustable Sachs shock absorbers provide suspension, and Heidenau tires are standard equipment. The widely spaced four-speed gearbox (plus reverse) remains fundamentally the same but CV joints have replaced the previous driveshaft and drive axle U-joints for a smoother, more durable transfer of power to the drive wheels.

## *Who Would Bother?*

Riding the Ural is a horse of different color. It is neither motorcycle nor car. Even the Can Am Spyder, Polaris Slingshot or a conventional trike handles completely differently. At first blush, the Ural's steering feels heavy and the machine seems to have a mind of its own. For someone who is married to a modern vehicle with power steering and air conditioning, plush interior and cushy suspension, this might feel a bit too primal. If you are addicted to the three-dimensional allure of a motorcycle, leaning into curves with the touch of a handlebar, it might feel clunky and heavy. Ural riders, sidecar drivers in general, are a rare breed. The very handling characteristics that make it strange are endearing once mastered, and they add another dimension to adventure travel. You never have to put down a foot at stop signs. Friends and strangers are wowed when you back out of a parking lot and passengers are thrilled (or terrified) when you fly the chair with them inside, a feat not recommended for first dates. The sidecar is at least more comfortable than riding pillion, and the heritage of these odd machines is unparalleled.

## *Taming the Beast*

My wife Susan and I recently had the unique opportunity to ride a Ural in the magnificent San Juan Mountains of Colorado. Our experience was one of the more memorable outings we've had in a long time. Initially, some accuse the beast of trying to kill them. This really isn't fair unless you have spent enough time in the saddle to learn the physics of a completely different kind of transportation, one most people will never experience. The













tendency on right turns for the car to “fly,” or lift off the ground, forces the driver to widen the turn radius or slow down to prevent upsetting the whole kit and kaboodle.

I can relate, as on two occasions I crossed the centerline when I felt the car lifting on a right-hand turn at some speed. I quickly backed off the throttle, which yanked the bars left, putting me in harm’s way against traffic. Thankfully there WAS no traffic at the time. It wasn’t long before I had explored the nature of the machine enough to learn the critical point of no return and could stay within the envelope, or lift the wheel at will. I also discovered that by extending my vision farther down the road and riding more conservatively than on a standard two-wheeler, I could prevent those whoopsies that lead to unplanned changes of underwear. Adding my wife to the sidecar also helped minimize aerial acrobatics. Although her added weight made it more difficult to fly the chair, the consequences also helped keep us grounded...mostly.

## *Shift and Wiggle*

When shifting, the Ural does a little wiggle dance unless you are ahead of the machine. This typically happens when accelerating or on extended climbs like Monarch Pass, where high power settings are interrupted by quickly squeezing and releasing the clutch. There is a yawing moment or tendency to turn left when braking or de-powering. It is caused by the inertia of the car against the motorcycle portion of the rig. Acceleration and deceleration forces act against the rear drive wheel, which is placed roughly four feet left of the car’s wheel, and make the rig pivot accordingly. A strong hand is required to keep the bike steady when riding in this way. It would amount to two skaters holding hands and the one on the left suddenly rolling over carpet while the other is still on a hard surface. When the skater on the carpet slows, they will sling the free-rolling skater to the left. The opposite happens when the other skater rolls over the carpet, hence when shifting, acceleration is interrupted by sudden engine braking, then another acceleration as the clutch is reengaged. Smooth operation is well rewarded.

## *The Gentle Way*

These tendencies aren’t difficult to mitigate once the rider retracts their habits to address the lateral forces before they occur. This can be done in two primary ways. When shifting, first roll back slightly on the throttle to balance any forward pull or acceleration. Ease in the clutch, shift, then ease it back out again while gently rolling on the throttle. The rig might tug a little to one side or the other but very mildly by comparison. Treat it nicely and it will respond accordingly.









## Some Like It Rough

Don't fight the rig. Instead, when riding more aggressively, especially on flat gravel with good sight distance, use the yawing tendency to your advantage to initiate a turn. For example, if you are approaching a left turn, roll in at some speed then roll off the throttle just as you initiate the turn. The motorcycle will effortlessly ease into the turn with little further input from the rider. If a tighter turn is desired, simply tap the rear brake and the rear tires will begin to slide out or "drift," pointing the rig deeper into the turn. This is called oversteer. The skid isn't hard to control if you ease into it gradually, and the fun factor is off the scale. You will be bootlegging turns in minutes.

For right turns, as long as the road tapers gently towards the shoulder or ditch, you can use the car's wheel to scribe a lower pathway than the wheels on the motorcycle. The open-view turns on Owl Creek Pass near Ridgway, Colorado were the perfect playground for this kind of riding. Simply drop the wheel into the groove and let'er rip. The motorcycle and sidecar would track like a slot car on right turns and the car's usual tendency to lift was offset by the camber of the road. If you reduce power, however, the rig will understeer making it harder to turn so it's best to stay on the gas.

These are just a couple of techniques for riding the Ural or any sidecar rig. Use moderation as you explore the possibilities and don't push your limits except when conditions are right to do so. Experts and lifelong side hack riders can perform incredible stunts and tricks far beyond these, but with a little practice, the old BMW knockoff can be a blast to ride and you will make new friends at every gas stop. The history, handling and overall experience of a Ural isn't for everyone, but those with a strong spirit of adventure will find it a unique way to explore the backroads and trails of the American West and beyond.

*Editor Note: If you want to learn more about Ural's Gear-Up as discussed by Bill from this story, scan the QR code and watch this video highlighting everything about this fun bike. **X4***



## BILL & SUSAN DRAGOO

### AUTHOR BIO

Bill Dragoo has spent a lifetime seeking adventure. First earning his Eagle Scout at 14, he became an expert level motocross rider, certified SCUBA diver, skydiver, sailplane, seaplane and glider pilot, flight instructor, and winner of two mountain biking state championships. He is also a certified Motorcycle Safety instructor and founded D.A.R.T. (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) after winning a place on BMW Motorrad's Team USA where he competed for the coveted International GS Trophy adventure riding competition in South Africa. Overlanding on four wheels has been a common thread throughout his adulthood.

Susan is an accomplished writer, photographer, hiker and adventure traveler in her own right, recently publishing her first book, "Finding the Butterfield: A Journey Through Time in Indian Territory."

He and Susan have embraced backcountry travel in their purpose built Gen V 4 Runner and their 1976 Toyota FJ 40 Land Cruiser. They enjoy overlapping their interests into a delightful stew of exploration and activities together, sharing these experiences with their readers.





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# THE GREAT ESCAPE



Kenneth Marks navigates his  
INEOS Grenadier through the  
backcountry of West Virginia  
- by Eric Iwashita







# THE GREAT ESCAPE







→ Young Mountain Biker  
Hitting a Drop on the Tech-  
nical Loop at McDowell  
Mounains - by Bret Edge





THE GREAT  
**ESCAPE**





Traveling along the Kokopelli Trail en route to Moab - by Josh Jewell



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# RES RELAX

A CAMP CHAIR FOR





# REST & RELAXATION FOR EVERY ADVENTURE

WORDS & PHOTOS – TRAVIS MONROE





## ESSENTIALS & RESTRICTIONS TO PONDER

In my quest to find the perfect chair, I tested some of the best known and most innovative designs on the market today—chairs you can stuff in a pack or bottom of a raft, and chairs that require dedicated storage space and tie-downs in or on your rig. My criteria for testing and choosing the best chair were both objective and subjective.

Obviously, a good camp chair scores high marks in construction, durability, weight, comfort, and packability. Think along the lines of a solid, heavy duty frame, double-stitching, abrasion resistance, breathable or insulated materials, reinforced stress points, and a reasonable price. But, shouldn't we also consider the specific adventure and how one might spend time in the seat. Will you be paddling a river, driving a truck, or relaxing at a tailgate or summer concert? Are you OK with some assembly? Stretching fabric over poles and hubs? Do you require back support or standard seat height? Is a heavy chair something you can manage/desire? Will you be sitting at a table? Might you want to carry the chair some distance from your vehicle? Will you be sitting on sand, the banks of a river, in remote campsites, or manicured lawns? Would you like something both functional and unique? Is style part of the equation? Certainly, a well-made, comfy chair is critical, but it's also about the intended use. The best chair might depend on your purpose, time of year, and destination as much as the materials and construction.

Thankfully, there is an abundance of creative brands designing chairs for every end-user, from collapsible, lightweight chairs you can strap to a backpack, larger loveseats you throw in your rig for an evening around a fire or enjoying a concert, and, as we will see, everything in between. I've even seen a chair with a down slip-cover. We've come a long way since the Crazy Creek Camp Chair!

## LET'S GET INTO IT!

I selected nine chairs to test. Three were small and easily stowed and packed in by foot or on a motorcycle along with a stove, food and tent. Four were larger chairs that were as simple as setting up a tripod. Finally, two of the chairs might not be on your radar, but they should be.

I've tested all of these chairs with the help of friends and family. The backpackers in the group enjoyed debating the smaller camp chairs, and everyone had a turn at the larger ones.

Each of the chairs in this review provide solid construction and are outstanding in their particular categories. Some offer unique design and/or materials. I'll highlight what I like most about each and what might keep it from being right for you. By the end of this review, my hope is that you will have a better understanding of the criteria you want to use in selecting the best chair for you and your travels.

Guiding river trips with teens is a lot of work. I cook, repair broken gear, teach paddling and camp skills, navigate the route (and young adult angst), and provide first aid. Setting up camp usually comes with rapid firing of questions about what to do. It's not all that dissimilar from leading a convoy of vehicles across the mountains or desert. After a day of this "work," a few minutes in a good chair is like a tall glass of lemonade and a shoulder massage.

A comfortable camp chair is high on my list of must-haves. Whether I'm traveling by foot, paddle, or 4x4, I always consider the best chair for my adventure. It can be *everything* when you need it most. Let's face it, the right chair makes the conversation more interesting, the food tastier, fire cozier, and night more magical. I want a dining, reading, reclining, drinking, repair, first-aid, waiting-out-the-rain-under-a-tarp, and give-my-feet-and-back-a-rest-from-the-trail chair. The question, however, persists: is there one chair that can deliver on all fronts?

**I DECIDED TO FIND OUT.**





## COMPACT CHAIRS

# NEMO MOONLITE ANTLER RECLINING CAMP CHAIR

Let's start off with the much debated small, packable chairs. Let's first consider why we are looking for compact seating: space and weight. They will be strapped to a backpack and carried long distances or may fit in a small space in a canoe or pannier. They are not the most comfortable nor roomy. They require some flexibility and core strength to fully enjoy. They are low to the ground and require some effort (and a little grace) to get into and out of a seated position. Likewise, all three require some construction and care in setting up. But like an ultralight air mattress, they are important for self-care and recovery. A comfortable seat around a pot of noodles is perfect for aching feet, legs and back.

NEMO offers two chairs in this review, and I absolutely love the Moonlite Antler for relaxing after a day on the river. It was part of my kit on three week-long river trips this year. I enjoyed it for several reasons, particularly for its weight-to-comfort ratio. It packs super small at 4.5 x 4.5 x 14 inches, weighs less than two pounds, and is the sturdiest packable chair I have used.

Oversized tubes, forged aluminum hubs, and mesh seat material provide strength and comfort, and the design also allows you to

cook, mend equipment, eat and relax while drying off and staying relatively cool. Adjustment straps let you recline when you find time for a coffee.

The ball and socket connectors that tie the material to the frame allow for ample movement and comfort. However, these connections can be stubborn when breaking the chair down and packing it up. A small side pocket lets you store your knife, compass, spork, or anything small you don't want to lose. The Moonlite Antler (\$160) is a solid choice for backpacking and fits in most panniers.

### LIKES:

SMALL, LIGHTWEIGHT  
(1 POUND, 14 OUNCES),  
AND STURDY CONSTRUCTION

BREATHABLE FABRIC

ADJUSTABLE STRAP  
FOR RECLINING

### DISLIKES:

CHALLENGING TO  
DISCONNECT THE  
BALL-AND-SOCKET  
CONNECTORS





#### LIKES:

VERY LIGHTWEIGHT

MAXIMUM CAPACITY RANGES  
ARE GOOD (265-320 POUNDS)

FIVE-YEAR WARRANTY

## HELIKEX CHAIR ONE

Helinox pioneered lightweight packable chairs. My first real camp chair was their minimalist Chair One (\$100). It is the green chair in the pictures. It's basically a cloth bucket with legs. You can't sleep in this chair, but it does its job by allowing you to relax after a hard day of rafting or backpacking. It gets high marks for a combination of comfort and backcountry portability.

The company specializes in some of the strongest, lightest, and most packable furniture available. Their construction is reliable and used across all models. My first Helinox has never failed me in the hundreds of miles I have packed it around the wilderness.

Helinox offers high-back chairs, ultralight chairs at just over one pound (I have not yet tested), and they now make a Chair One Mini that weighs exactly one pound.

Time-tested technology is the same with all of the Helinox chairs; their aluminum alloy poles and resin hubs are proprietary. Additionally, the company's lightweight chair category uses recycled 600D and 300D polyester, and they use virgin polyester materials in their ultralight chairs.

The high-back chairs, like [Chair Two](#), are a great option if you are looking for something to chill out in while your more industrious partner prepares the meals and does most of the camp duties. Lucky you! All of their chairs are comfortable, but these high-back versions let you close your eyes without falling out. As I mentioned, these small, packable chairs require some flexibility and core strength to fully enjoy.

#### DISLIKES:

SMALL FEET TEND TO SINK  
INTO THE GROUND

(THEIR GROUND CHAIR  
ALLEVIATES SOME OF  
THIS CONCERN)

## KERMIT

The Kermit stands out among all chairs in regards to style. It has big chair feel in a compact size that fits well either on a motorcycle or in a large rig. It's great if space is limited but you still want that real chair character.

Designed by and for BMW riders, this chair has had an almost cult following for over forty years. It's my choice of chair for 4x4 outings when I want a traditional seat feel and don't mind sitting a bit lower to the ground. I don't own a motorcycle, but packed full, my '81 Land Cruiser holds only slightly more than a BMW GS.

Adding separately purchased leg extensions increases the seat height from 12.5 to 17 inches—almost as tall as standard chairs. Capacity is 250 pounds, and they are available in oak and walnut. There is a two-inch wider version if you want more room.

The Kermit provides some great accessories, too, including a similarly styled table and cup holders that easily attach to the chair. The cup holders are much nicer than the soft pockets integrated into most camp chairs. I especially like the table (also in the same finish) for drinks, a dinner plate, or book; it fits nicely in a tent for organizing bits and bobs, and it rolls up and packs away like the chair. I love the setup—sophisticated, practical and sturdy.

#### LIKES:

FIVE-YEAR WARRANTY (BUT IT WON'T BE  
NECESSARY IF YOU TAKE PROPER CARE)

WEIGHS 5.5 POUNDS AND PACKED SIZE  
IS A MODEST 22 X 6 INCHES

MADE IN TENNESSEE, U.S.A.



#### DISLIKES:

PRICIER SETUP, RUNNING \$300-350  
DEPENDENT ON WOOD AND WIDTH

DEPLOYMENT TAKES MORE TIME,  
WITH SEVERAL PARTS THAT MUST  
BE FITTED





## FULL SIZE CHAIRS

# ROAM CAMP CHAIR & 23ZERO SPRINGBAK

These two chairs have a lot in common. The 23Zero Springbak (\$119) and ROAM Camp Chair (\$159) are your typical full-size expanding camp chairs with wide, solid seats. Like most chairs, they collapse for storage and transportation.

The 23Zero Springbak weighs in at a hefty 14 pounds due to its steel frame. The shock cord-attached 600D polyester seat and back do a good job of mimicking spring cushions for a softer but supported experience. The ROAM Camp Chair, at slightly more than 9 pounds, provides a firmer experience with canvas over a solid aluminum frame. Both chairs offer similar comfort and strong construction. You can sit comfortably in either of these chairs for hours.

### LIKES:

- The 23Zero Springbak has a 330-pound capacity (tops for all chairs in this review), a contoured back for better lumbar support, and a clever cup holder that accommodates a wine glass
- The Springbak's pivoting feet are a step up in stability on uneven terrain

- The ROAM Camp Chair offers a wider, more comfortable wood composite arm rest
- The ROAM's large mesh back pocket is handy and the carry bag has a comfortable shoulder strap

### DISLIKES:

- The Springbak's durable, foam-covered armrests provide solid support for getting out of the chair, but I find them narrow and lacking in comfort over the course of an evening
- The Springbak carrying case has handles but no shoulder strap

Either chair is great if you have plentiful storage space and favor a stationary setup at camp. They are sturdy, roomy seats, easy to set up and stow. Throw them in the back of your truck when headed to an evening with friends or tailgate; they can handle significant abuse. I like the 23Zero for the contoured back and the ROAM for its armrests. My cattle dog will claim the ROAM Camp Chair if left unattended for any amount of time.





## REI OUTWARD LAWN CHAIR

This lighter, less expensive version of the full-size camp chair sells for \$90. The REI Outward Lawn Chair folds, but does not fully collapse. Stowing and carrying dimensions are 32 x 23 x 5 inches. Lightest (7 pounds, 7 ounces) of the standard height chairs in this review, it's basically a swankier version of the classic plastic webbing woven over an aluminum frame everyone used in the 60s and 70s.

The 300D ripstop polyester material is abrasion resistant and more comfortable than the plastic webbing of old (it's solid material rather than woven strips). No stripe marks on the back of your thighs. It deploys easily and the U-shaped tubular legs provide a secure platform no matter the surface. It will basically float on sand.

One thing I love about this chair is the backpack straps. It's not only a light chair, but being able to carry it like a daypack leaves your hands free to grab an ice chest, blanket or picnic. And, your partner won't mind carrying their own chair! It is our go-to for summer concerts or a visit to the beach or anyplace that requires some walking. I would be happier if it were \$65, and you can probably get it closer to this price during an REI member sale.

### LIKES:

LIGHTWEIGHT AND WIDER ARM  
RESTS THAN MOST

BACKPACK CARRYING STRAPS

A QUICK CLIP NOT ONLY KEEPS THE SEAT  
CLOSED IN TRANSIT, BUT ALLOWS YOU TO  
STASH ITEMS (I.E. A BLANKET OR SUB  
SANDWICH) IN THE FOLDED SEAT  
FOR CARRYING

### DISLIKES:

TOO EXPENSIVE FOR  
WHAT YOU GET

NOT AS DURABLE AS  
OTHER CHAIRS





## KELTY LOW LOVESEAT CAMP CHAIR

The Kelty Low Loveseat is an improvement on the British army folding chair design that has been around since World War II. This upgrade has replaced canvas with a durable, quilted 600D polyester, making it soft and warm. Given its room for two, I love it as an alternative for couples and anyone with kids or a pampered pet. The carry case even doubles as a dog mat. Cattle dog rates it four paws!

It's not an innovative chair, but I love the Low Loveseat when my wife and I are headed somewhere and it might get chilly or we want to spend time chatting around a fire with friends. We also use it on summer mornings in the mountains while enjoying a great vista. Kelty has taken an old design and turned it into a two-person chair with improvements in every area.

It is heavy (15.4 pounds), but it doesn't take up as much room as two large single chairs when packed up (34.5 x 11 x 11 inches). It does, unfortunately, offer a somewhat limited total weight capacity of 400 pounds. And, at 13.5 inches high, you will sit lower to the ground than in most chairs. Kelty does offer a taller version for the same price. However, I prefer the low version because it is slightly more reclined, inviting a convivial experience. Simply add a blanket and drink to make your own warmth.

If you want to spend time close to your significant other, there aren't many options that will match this chair at \$130. Kelty offers a Nest version with Velcro-attached quilts for two at a slightly higher price of \$150. What's not to love?





## CHAIRS WITH ATTITUDE

# NEMO STARGAZE RECLINING CAMP CHAIR

The Stargaze is the leave-me-alone-I'm-looking-for-the-galactic-center chair. Don't get me wrong, you can socialize in this chair, but don't leave it for long or someone else will be enjoying Saturn and Orion.

People are both intrigued and a bit cautious of this chair. No need to be hesitant! Just plop down in the chair's embrace, and you might be teleported back to the tire swing of your youth—only with a lot more cushioning. Then, as though the chair knows your desires, you almost involuntarily recline, facing skyward while everything fades away.

NEMO engineers have developed the waterbed of camp chairs—all you want to do is float back and close your eyes. But, don't worry. The chair has you cradled, and you won't fall out. If anything, you might need a helping hand escaping its velvety clutches.

It can feel a little cramped if you have broad shoulders, but it really shines when you are actually stargazing. I have spent hours in the wilderness watching satellites, meteors, planes, and stars make tracks across the sky. This chair is incredibly comfortable, sturdy, and is an absolute must for the 2025 Perseids meteor shower.

It's all of eight pounds, with an aircraft aluminum frame and polyester mesh material, and it includes a lifetime warranty. I don't use the cup holder much; it's almost an afterthought. And, packing it away in its bag can be like trying to fold up one of those car sunshades with the two spring loops. I've packed it differently each time.



### LIKES:

MAXIMUM CAPACITY IS 300 POUNDS

LIFETIME WARRANTY

IT'S ABOUT RELAXING, STARGAZING,  
AND SLEEPING—NO COMPLAINTS HERE



### DISLIKES:

THE STARGAZE ISN'T CHEAP (\$250)

ITS WEIGHT AND DESIGN REQUIRES  
SOME EFFORT TO SET UP AND SUG-  
GESTS YOU DON'T WANT TO MOVE  
IT AROUND A LOT



# ENO LOUNGER DL

Another unique chair comes from ENO, the highly successful and innovative hammock company. Their Lounger DL will remind you of one of their hammocks, with its very laid back design. It is my favorite chair that, frankly, should get more use. When I sit in this chair, I just want someone to turn up the music and pull the ice chest closer. The integrated pillow and reclining angle invite relaxation.

Feature #1 you didn't know you wanted: a built-in water bottle holder in the carrying case—genius. Feature #2 you didn't know you wanted: two stretch canvas side pockets for when your eyelids get heavy. You can store your phone, a book, a snack, anything in these elastic pockets on either side of the seat.

Recycled 300D ripstop polyester over an anodized aluminum frame provides this chair with a 300-pound capacity, all while weighing in at 5 pounds, 10 ounces. The seat is narrower than most but, like a hammock, will accommodate wider buttocks. It sits almost fourteen inches high, but when the legs are retracted it is nine inches off the turf.

I take it to every music festival, climbing wall, and picnic. My friends love it almost more than I do.



## LIKES:

DEPLOYING IT CAN BE A FUN PROJECT (LIKE AN ERECTOR SET) FOR THE KIDS

ONE OF THE COOLEST CHAIRS AROUND



## DISLIKES:

WHEN PACKED, IT IS A TRIANGLE BACKPACK MEASURING 20.5 X 19.5 X 5 INCHES.

THE DRINK HOLDER ISN'T GREAT BUT WILL HOLD YOUR BEVERAGE SECURELY

FRAME CAN BE EASILY BENT IF NOT FULLY PUT TOGETHER

PRICEY FOR A SECONDARY CHAIR (\$150)





## CONCLUSION

I did not find the one chair to rule all chairs. Indeed, I found I needed to commit a bit more of my storage closet to chairs. Chairs I can use at the beach, on my patio, at a concert, when I am packrafting, or driving my truck into the wilderness. Are there cheaper versions of these chairs? Of course. But, you will find the knockoffs are often smaller and made of lighter, less robust materials. And, for the most part, they tend to be less comfortable.

The greatest benefit of a vehicle-based adventure is the ability to indulge yourself with gear, food and drink you just can't fit in an 85-liter backpack. In almost every circumstance, I will take a chair that provides the most comfort and fits with the mode of transport.

If I am kayaking or packrafting, I won't hesitate to pack the NEMO Moonlite. If I am in a canoe, I might step it up and take the Kermit or the ENO Lounger. I can go many ways with my Land Cruiser, but I'll most likely find space for the Kelty and throw the Kermit in there for pure style and comfort. If I am in a small group or want to work outdoors on journaling or writing, I am going to take the Kermit chair and table or my full-sized aluminum table and the ROAM Camp Chair.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

ENO, NEMO and REI use materials that adhere to Bluesign safety and environmental requirements. Kelty is one of the four founding members of the Conservation Alliance. The lightweight Helinox chair category utilizes recycled polyester, and 23Zero is making efforts to become more environmentally friendly by utilizing ECO13B fabrics from recycled PET bottles. **X4**

### TRAVIS MONROE

#### AUTHOR BIO



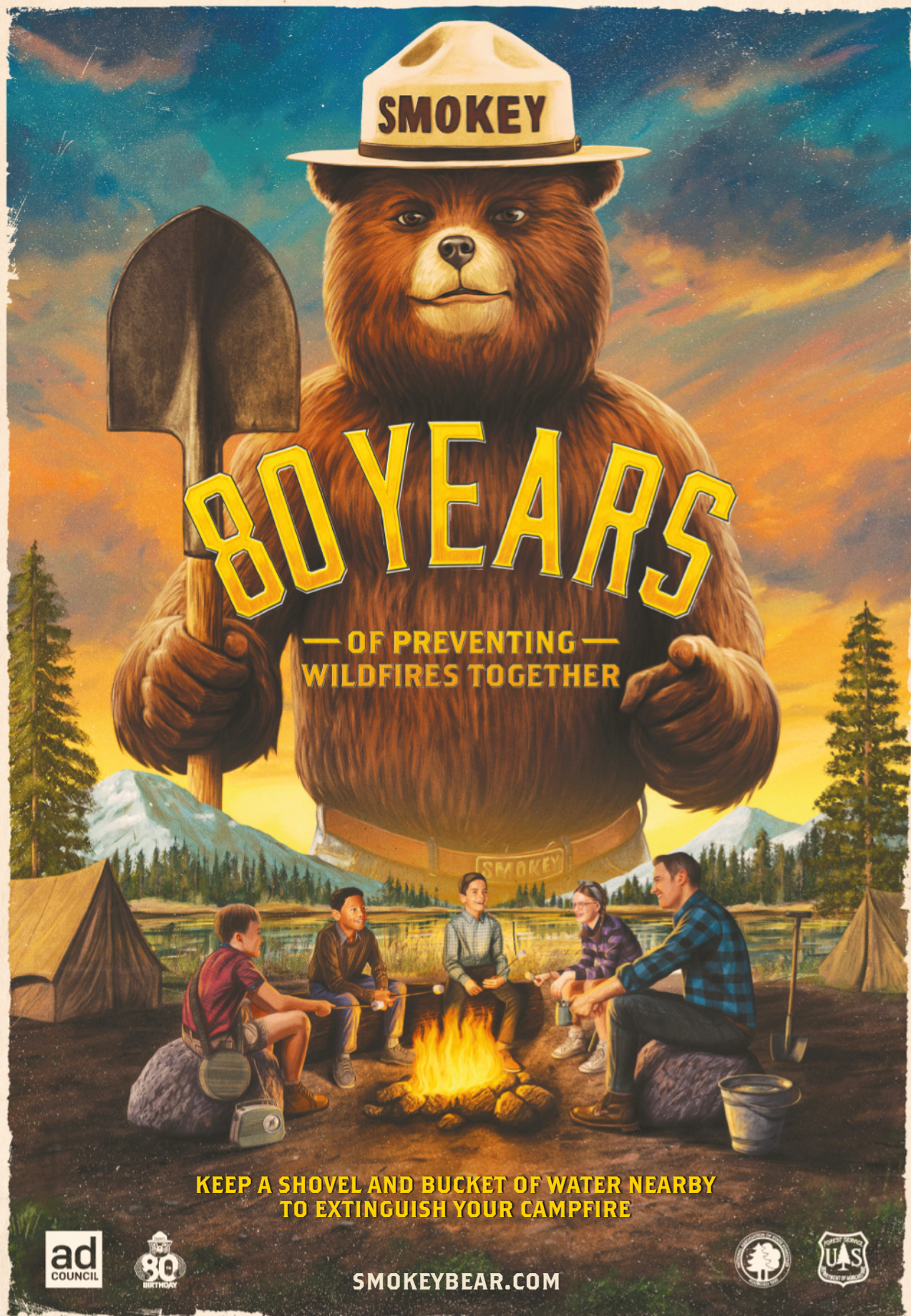
Travis resides in Norman, Oklahoma with his wife, Margie, and is an outdoor educator, writer, photographer and avid adventurer. He enjoys a variety of outdoors pursuits, from SCUBA diving to mountaineering, but spends most of his time working with secondary and college-aged students teaching hard and soft skills for living and leading in the wilderness.

During the school year he teaches kayaking to underserved youth in the Oklahoma City area, and works year-round with fathers and their children in an outdoor enrichment program as well as guides river trips in the summer when he is not off-roading and learning to maintain his '81 FJ.

Travis believes the best relationships are forged from a shared outdoor experience and seeks opportunities for his friends, family and clients to find new passions through adventure.

You can keep up with Travis at his website [www.mountainfork.rocks](http://www.mountainfork.rocks) or on Instagram [@travis48](https://www.instagram.com/travis48).





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# Livin' the Van Life

ERLAND

BASECAMP  
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WORDS - JASON R. SAKURAI

PHOTOS - JASON R. SAKURAI AND  
COURTESY OF FORD

WORDS - JASON SAKURAI

PHOTOS - JASON SAKURAI AND COURTESY OF MERCEDES-BENZ USA

# Down for the Ride:

An Inside Look with Iain Forsyth,  
General Manager of Marketing at  
Mercedes-Benz Vans USA





It's no wonder vans have continued to provide an exceptional platform for vehicle-based adventure travel. Their versatility and utility for life on the road provides a canvas for adventurers to build out and customize based on need and budget.

Recently, we had the opportunity to sit down and visit with Iain Forsyth of Mercedes-Benz to discuss van life and MB's role as a leader in the space.

**OutdoorX4 (OX4): To what extent are van life and adventure vans a part of M-B Vans USA's product planning?**

**Iain Forsyth, General Manager of Marketing, Product Management & Upfitter Management at Mercedes-Benz Vans USA (IF):**

Supporting Sprinter in this segment as the #1 choice of builders and enthusiasts is a critical part of our product, sales and marketing strategy.

**OX4: Has there been an increase in van production to accommodate the growth in vans for other than commercial uses?**

**IF:** There are multiple factors that have affected all channels. For 2025, we don't foresee growth in market share. We have stable production coming from three global factories, and as a result, a stable supply.

**OX4: Upfitters or van builders are growing in numbers. We see that there**

**are upfitters in almost every state in the U.S. and every Canadian province. How does this fit in with M-B Vans' marketing?**

**IF:** We are utilizing all applicable social media channels to reach our audience, as well as van builders through our eXpertUpfitter program. Overland Expo West was a great setting for engagement, and we had a presence there. We have national event teams to provide outreach.

**OX4: In the Pacific Northwest where I reside, there have been a number of M-B vans commercials, emphasizing the fun of getting outdoors and camping in a Sprinter. Was this targeted towards campers and outdoor enthusiasts here, or was it more widespread?**

**IF:** No, we've not been targeting areas, but instead have moved around to provide support for events in those areas.









**OX4:** Builders of Class B Sprinter vans are building adventure vans that are off-road capable. Is the ability to go off-road in a Sprinter an attribute that M-B acknowledges and embraces?

**IF:** We are involved in a lot of different events. Back to Baja, a three-day event, is one that we supported through Flarespace, which is owned by Storyteller Overland, one of our marketing partners. We embrace these builds through our social media channels.

**OX4:** Following the thought of taking a Sprinter off-highway, there are excursions in the California desert for that very purpose. Are you aware of these types of events?

Some events such as Back to Baja are supported. We are constantly watching and evaluating these types of events for potential Sprinter marketing collaboration opportunities. If it's in line with our strategy, we'll do it. At the height of COVID, we had no plans to do excursions like this, but a lot has changed since then.

**OX4:** There are structural advantages Sprinter has that your competitors lack, such as the rear door hinges and the roof. Both allow for racks and accessories to be mounted to them with ease. Was this by design or happenstance?

**IF:** This all came about by design. While key mounting points were not always supported by Mercedes-Benz Vans, we do now. Our Body Equipment Guidelines tell dealers and builders where they can mount racks, ladders or accessories safely.





We also have our eXpertUpfitter program, a portal where builders can access information they need to convert vans. It is much the same as our Van Partner program in Europe.

**OX4: One competitor touts their dealer network as a rationale for buying their vans. What do you say when you have fewer dealers, most of which are in metro or suburban locations away from camping and recreational areas?**

We have a dedicated network of van dealers and specific van centers. We have the most up-to-date technicians and training. Ours is the best service in the industry, and we feel our centrally-located dealers are quite capable of handling the needs of Mercedes-Benz van owners.

**OX4: Do you have an upfitter program or certification that as a consumer assures me that a builder is knowledgeable and capable of building my Sprinter camper van?**

Yes, our program in the U.S. and Canada is known as the eXpertUpfitter program. Interested upfitters can contact their local Mercedes-Benz Vans dealership for a referral, which is necessary in order to receive an invitation to the program. If they are approved for the program, they can become self-certified. On approval, they will be able to access our Body and Equipment guidelines. The ability to certify themselves with the support of Mercedes-Benz is not checked. It requires builders as technicians and managers to have a high degree of integrity.





**OX4: Ford has debuted the Trail, a more robust version of the Transit for adventure van enthusiasts. Will there be a M-B version or response to this variant?**

**IF:** We are aware of the competitive environment. Mercedes-Benz is committed to working with our body builders on our product to enhance and improve it to meet the satisfaction of owners.

**OX4: An M-B dealer in Oregon, M-B of Wilsonville, has their own van conversion facility called Out & Upfitters that has done well with meeting consumers' needs. Do you work with all the upfitters such as Storyteller Overland, Outside Van and Benchmark?**

**IF:** No, we don't work with all of the upfitters, but we do with those that are in our program. Storyteller Overland is a good example of a fantastic partner. They have even submitted two of their Mode vans voluntarily to be checked through our upfitter program.

Our aim is to build volume, and to support these high-end custom builds. Outside Van is an example of a unique, purpose-built adventure van. Going forward, we expect Outside Van and Storyteller Overland will both continue to produce even more vans.

While there are some model differences between Mercedes-Benz vans in the U.S. and elsewhere, we work very closely with our Canadian counterparts. Our eXpertUpfitter programs have the same standards for both countries. **X4**

*Editor Note: OutdoorX4 would like to thank Iain Forsyth, and also Cathleen Decker, the Product and Communications PR Lead with Mercedes-Benz USA, for setting up this interview for us.*



## JASON R. SAKURAI

AUTHOR BIO



Life has been quite an adventure for Jason. Eschewing corporate life with General Motors and Nissan early on, he opted instead to be the Western Advertising Manager for Four Wheeler magazine, outselling well entrenched, larger rival publications. From there, he became the first Director of Sales for the National Hot Rod Association, reviving its moribund Championship Drag Racing Series on TV with a plethora of new advertisers. Later, he excelled as Western Ad Sales Manager for Cycle World magazine, before starting his own firm, Roadhouse Marketing, specializing in the automotive after-market and action sports/outdoor industries.

Concurrently throughout his career, Jason has been an editor and contributor to automotive enthusiast titles in print and online too numerous to mention. He has won International Automotive Press Association (IAPA) awards for writing and photography, and more recently served as an IAPA judge. His insights on the auto industry appear regularly in business publications, and he still shoots feature stories for enthusiast magazines here as well as abroad. In his spare time, Jason is working on his latest overlanding vehicle, planning for a number of adventures once it's completed. His motto, 'If it isn't fun, why do it?', applies not only to his travels but to business as well, and for this reason is a valuable member of the OutdoorX4 staff.





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## TREADMARKS

## *Through the Eyes of a Child*

### WORDS - BILL DRAGOO

I am fascinated by the inquisitive nature of children. As a young adult who happened to be an only child, I avoided them like the plague but over the years they have grown on me. We have seven grandchildren so I suppose satiation has contributed to my inoculation. A couple of those grandchildren and a few stray loaners from neighbors and friends have taken an interest in my workshop and the machines within. On occasion they will ask to come over and hang out, a request I will bend over backwards to make it happen. You could say I find myself wrapped around these tiny little fingers.

I will set up scenarios to keep them busy and provide tactile sensations of cold steel, lubricants and cleaning agents while filling their minds with the nuances of operating a ratchet or pair of safety wire pliers. The fundamental value of using tools unfolds before me as I coach how to align a screwdriver or reverse a ratchet and when to use the open or closed end of a combination wrench. As I watch them, I feel a connection, a freshness of knowledge that takes me back to my own youth, digging tools

from the floorboard of my grandfather's old pickup or from a cluttered workbench in the garage next to the country filling station that supported my family in those days.

Nine-year old Allani, AKA LaLa, is one of those prodigy children who is infatuated with her motorcycle. Daily, she tears around her acreage at warp speed on her Honda CRF 70 or balances at low speeds while engaging technical terrain like a half pint trials rider. She routinely asks to come over and her parents are always quick to accommodate. Her bike was showing signs of needing maintenance so we took advantage of the opportunity to do a deep dive into how things work. On the way to fetch her and her bike I picked up Oli, the twelve-year old son of another good friend who has also shown interest in motorcycles and hanging with "Uncle Bill." These two had only met once before but they became fast friends, taking turns to remove plastic, drain the oil, replace the spark plug, and clean and adjust the chain. We even performed a valve adjustment, an operation I royally messed up on my own Honda CL 70 more than a half century ago. I didn't have an Uncle Bill to save me from myself.





begging for a ride. There is a satisfaction to maintaining machinery and children feel it deeply when they are hands on, reversing the effects of rough treatment.

The time finally came to load the bike and return the borrowed children to their respective parents. Big smiles, dirty faces and greasy fingernails left no doubt that these kiddos had had a good time. Budding confidence showed in their eyes and they were eager to tell their friends and parents what they had learned. I felt a satisfaction far above the usual feeling of accomplishment for a day in the workshop. Tasks that are routine for me are amazing to them and that amazement is reflected back to me when I see these operations performed for the first time through the eyes of a child. **X4**



LaLa and Oli worked for hours, handing off tools to one another, helping hold things to prevent dropping parts and going elbow deep into the solvent vat to clean the outer engine case and other parts before reinstalling. They learned to measure and pour oil, gap a spark plug, adjust the chain and set tire pressures. They washed and oiled the air filter and replaced a cracked fuel line.

Once the bike was reassembled, they waxed the plastic and polished the chrome wheels, leaving the bike gleaming and



## ABOUT BILL DRAGOO

Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill's not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he's busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the "GS of Trucks."

Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and BMW Motorrad Certified Off Road Instructor, and owns/operates the DART (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) school near the Dragoos' hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa.

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# OTTER THE OVERLANDER

## Jason Smurthwaite's 1965 Volkswagen Bus

WORDS & PHOTOS – ERIC ARNOLD

After years of seeing the shell of a 1965 11-window Volkswagen Bus sitting on railroad ties outside a Utah storage building, Jason Smurthwaite would ultimately parlay restoration of the owner's 1970 camper in trade for the older body. This would lead him down the path of not only owning his first split window Bus, but he would also build a tribute to the family who once owned it.

Lin Ottinger began giving tours through the Utah canyonlands in 1960. Southeastern Utah Taxi Service (renamed later to Lin Ottinger's Tours) was the first tour company of its kind. He used a fleet of VW Buses to ferry tourists through the mostly uncharted region. Ten pre-1967 Buses comprised the entire fleet, with eight being in use during much of the 1970s and 80s, when Lin retired.

Years after, one of the original ten Buses was restored by KCW in Colorado, which prompted a get-together of VWs for a celebratory off-road tour through the backcountry surrounding Moab. The gathering, known as the Ottinger Caravan, became an annual event. During its second year, Jason Smurthwaite once again gazed upon the shell of the '65.

"I hopped into the 21 Window tour bus, and we headed to the warehouse to see all the original Ottinger tour buses in their glory," said Smurthwaite. "As we were getting closer, I knew exactly where we were heading—to the location of the white Split Bus I had seen years earlier. I had driven past it before, and you could only notice it if you looked at just the right moment."



Smurthwaite had no idea it was the same location as the original tour buses.

Around the campfire that evening, Lin Ottinger's son, Sonny, explained an arrangement Lin and a friend had made regarding another Bus, a 1970 Camper. An engine build was necessary. Smurthwaite reached out to the friend to see if there was anything he could do to help get the '70 Camper on the road. The friend revealed he may not be able to complete the project and asked if Jason wanted to take the reins.

"At this moment," Smurthwaite said, "I realized this might be my only chance to own a Split Bus."

He agreed to complete the build in trade for the shell of the white '65. The '70 Camper was completed in five months and delivered to Lin a week before his 90th birthday.

"The inside was full of sand and debris, the transmission and rear decklid were missing, and the front spindles were gone," Smurthwaite recalled about the condition of the '65 as it sat outside Ottinger's warehouse. The body was very straight, though it suffered from some rust in the rockers, floor, and crossmembers. Smurthwaite, along with his dad and Sonny Ottinger, loaded the Bus onto the trailer for the trip back to Salt Lake City.

The first order of business was to strip off the white paint, which had been sprayed on at an unknown date. Smurthwaite removed the white layer and exposed the original Sealing Wax Red and Beige Grey combination which, remarkably, almost completely survived underneath.

"The original paint was in too great of shape to repaint it," Smurthwaite said. "I wanted to show the decades of wear and tear and keep the amazing story it shows. I touched up the areas of repair and a few spots that were sanded down to bare metal."

The underside of the Bus was cleaned and blasted. Three-step POR-15 was applied, which was covered with primer, and then color-matched Raptor Liner was applied to the undercarriage and lower rockers.

The Bus was christened "Otter the Overlander" in homage to the Ottinger family and their history.

"I was told this Bus had been used on occasion as a fill-in when all the tours were full or a Bus was needing repair," Smurthwaite said. He had traced the original logos from the Bus he restored for the family, the second of the original tour buses to be restored, and had planned to paint them on his own build. "I decided not to do the tour logos, but to create my own logos using the same letters from the tour bus."

Therefore, the "Otter" logos reference the original style.

This Bus was re-built for strength and longevity. Smurthwaite









took his inspiration for the off-road aspects of the build from a lifetime of camping and owning Buses and off-roading in Baja races. The suspension was raised for more clearance. The original beam was cut and made adjustable. Smurthwaite also drilled the spot welds and cut the engine cradle to lower it 1.25 inches to run a Beetle nosecone to gain more height and move the spring plates down.

At the corners are BFG MT tires (215/75/R15) on Wolfsburg West 15-inch stock wheels. Behind them, for more stopping power, are Type E Motorsports disc brakes using large Chevrolet calipers and cross-drilled, slotted and vented rotors.

Under the decklid is a blueprinted and balanced 2180cc engine built by Smurthwaite himself.

"I wanted to create a simple stroker engine with thick wall cylinders to help with the heat and have enough power to not be a typical Bus going 25 miles per hour uphill," he said.

The build features CB Performance Panchito heads and Super push rods, AA thick wall 92mm pistons and cylinders, Dellorto 40mm carburetors, an EPMP 90-amp alternator, custom intake, and so much more.

Otter's interior received plenty of attention, as well. Several methods of sound deadening material were employed throughout the Bus, including ceramic insulation, RetroMat sound dampening, and Havelock Wool insulation.

The birch wood panels came from Clara's Panels, as did the gray panels in the cab. Gray tweed upholstery and padding were sourced from Sewfine Products. The rear seat is a custom full-width bench that also houses a diesel heater, lithium house battery, solar charger, and more.

"I wanted the interior as simple as possible, but to look classy" Smurthwaite said.

He also created in-floor compartments just inside the cargo doors, an idea he got from Vanagon owners who use them for tools and recovery gear. The three compartments are hidden beneath the floor mat.

In the cockpit, the main gauge is a GPS speedometer with a custom VW logo from Speedhut, accompanied by a built-in tachometer. The ashtray was modified to house 12v accessory and USB ports. A switch panel runs all the solenoids that power the accessories Smurthwaite has installed. One switch runs power to the roof and a wireless system to run all the off-road lights. Another is for the KC Cyclone rock lights mounted to the belly pans. The last is for the winch.

Smurthwaite completed the majority of the work in his own shop, Westy Restorations, which he founded in 2016.











"It was a dream of mine to build a car that could make it to the SEMA show after attending the show 20 years prior," Smurthwaite said. "Being sponsored by EMPI helped push the Bus over the goal line more quickly, with just six months to finish, when it was sitting on a rotisserie with the inside freshly painted. It was a long road with several custom parts to be completed. I barely pulled it off in the last week before the show."

## AS IS TRUE WITH ANY BUILD, THERE WERE MANY HANDS INVOLVED.

"I want to thank my wife for all she has done during this process," Smurthwaite said. "Me being away every spare moment was not easy. I also want to thank the local VW scene and family who helped during the build and came together during the last week to help finish. Without them, I would have never made it. Along with the sponsors who sent products and were involved with the build. EMPI, GoWesty Camper Products, RetroSound Manufacturing, A1 Performance Exhaust, Blackline Racing, and Factor 55. Their parts and work truly help make this Bus what it is."

Since Otter was completed, Jason has taken him on many adventures, from SEMA to a variety of events, as well as to the annual Ottinger Caravan in Moab, Utah, where he showed off his off-road capabilities, handling everything the trails put in his path with ease.

Future plans for Otter may include shipping to Europe for an extended family road trip, but for now, don't be surprised to see him kicking up dust in the middle of the desert or camping in the backcountry. Otter the Overlander is ready for anything! **X4**

### ERIC ARNOLD

AUTHOR BIO



Eric is a seasoned photographer who focuses primarily on automotive subjects. As a vintage Volkswagen owner, he is highly involved in the VW and classic car communities. His 1977 Westfalia Camper, which he's owned for over 20 years, takes him on all sorts of adventures both near his home in Las Vegas, and all around the Western states.

Eric loves camping, whether it is in the desert, or in the mountains. As long as he has his camera at his side, he'll be there, especially if his VW Bus can come!



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# When Schemes Become Dreams: Our FJ40 Preservation Project







# ADV BUILT FOR ENT URE

WORDS – BILL DRAGOO | PHOTOS – SUSAN DRAGOO



*The little red Datsun pickup slewed sideways like a tractor trailer on ice, tires squealing as I exited the highway, the heavier 1973 Toyota FJ40 easily pushing the smaller truck into a skid with the towbar. I couldn't have cared less about the dangers of this mismatched arrangement. It was 1978, I was 23 and I was bringing home my first Land Cruiser.*

*I soon had it running with a small block Chevy V8 and an adapter for the transmission. It was a cumbersome rig but it had more personality than a dozen Corvettes to this budding off-road enthusiast. Every hour beneath the hood yielded many blissful miles rattling through the backcountry of southeastern Oklahoma and south-central Colorado. I had sold it by 1980 and it would be almost 40 years before I had another Land Cruiser.*

## **"NICE TRUCK. HOW FAR DOES IT GO?"**

Three young women stopped me and my wife Susan as we were about to enter the restaurant. We had just stepped out of our faded blue 1976 Toyota FJ40, the long-awaited replacement for my old Chevota.

"That's a great question," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I know a lot of people who own them don't drive them very much. They are hard to drive and they break down a lot."

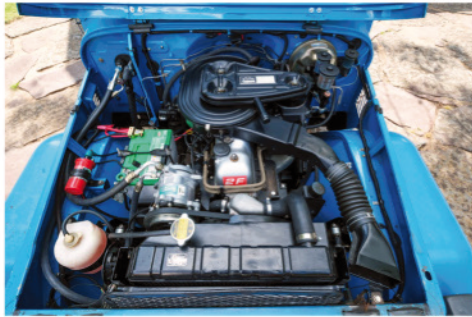
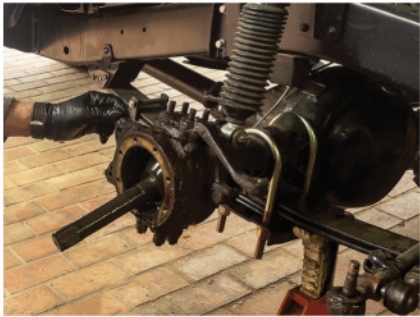
I laughed. "Some certainly do. In fact, we've been sorting out a couple of issues on this one but it's getting better. We just returned from a five-state trip out west. It goes pretty far I guess."

Since selling my first FJ40 I've been drawn back to them, hoping someday to have one near stock, with just the right modifications to make it more user-friendly. As for reliability, they were as good as their owners' abilities to maintain them. It's just a matter of performing quality workmanship when making the repairs and upgrades. Most issues are induced by the passage of time and ham-fisted tinkering.

I purchased this truck from Chris Johnson, a good friend who had owned it for more than 30 years. His sons learned to drive behind that big steering wheel and it spent much of its life in a barn in New Mexico. He called her Elsie, a play on the initials LC. Chris kept any significant rust at bay and Elsie was pretty much stock with only 76,000 miles on the odometer when I purchased it, ahem, "her." She ran but the owner before Chris













had driven her without an air cleaner and the engine was shot. Compression was 80 psi and below. Oil consumption nearly rivaled fuel usage, quart for quart.

One ambitious day I borrowed a cherry picker and pulled the engine, launching the mission of preserving this piece of history for a few more decades. I delivered the engine to Folks Machine Shop in our home town of Norman, Oklahoma. Austin Folks and his dad George took a personal interest in the project and embraced my desire to modestly improve the performance, primarily in the lower rpm range. A .070 over bore was required to clean up the cylinder walls. Pistons weren't available in that size so I reached out to Darius Tarman at Ross Pistons for a custom set with a compression ratio of just under 9/1, adding a bit more grunt to the now 264 cu. in. motor (up from 258). Folks also installed .070 oversized valves, new guides and seats from a Chevy 305 V8, then balanced the whole crankshaft assembly. The camshaft went to my friend Faith Zeelenberg at Web Cams who created a special grind for improved torque and smooth operation below 3,000 rpm. Ask Faith for the "Dragoo Adventures" cam profile. Valvoline VR1 10W30 was selected for lubrication. Most modern oils are reducing the amount zinc but this critical element is essential for longevity in these old flat tappet engines. At nearly 3000 ppm, VR1 has nearly double the amount in other oils.

Old Aisan carburetors can be fussy so I opted to upgrade to a Holly Sniper 2300 EFI. Justin Robbins at Redline Land Cruisers was helpful with tips and information on the engine build so it made sense to use their purpose-built adapters and installation kit along with their pointless distributor upgrade, keeping the look of the original but with the benefits of a hotter spark and no more points to adjust or replace. Justin also rebuilt the rocker shaft assembly with new bushings and a re-chromed shaft. These are common wear components for the 2F motor, especially if oil changes are sporadic. Engine parts like gaskets, lifters, timing gears and other necessary workings were sourced from my local dealer, Fowler Toyota; JT Outfitters; FJ Depot; Specter Off Road and a few other suppliers. Thankfully, although expensive, parts are still available. Transfer case seals and gaskets came from Sonny Martinez at Fjparts.com.

We hauled the truck to Cody McClain with McClain's Custom Hot Rods in Goldsby, Oklahoma, for a detailed analysis of body and chassis integrity. My instructions to him were to scrub, inspect and seal the underside, focusing on any areas that could cause issues in the foreseeable future. When I returned a week later, to my surprise, the body hung high overhead on a two-post lift and the rolling chassis sat nearby, about to be sand blasted and powder coated. Although this would add significant cost, Cody, in his quiet, matter-of-fact way stated, "I know what you want and this is the best way to accomplish it."

The die was cast. Mission creep had struck and my mild upgrades had just morphed into a notable time and financial

commitment. A complete wire brushing of the underside and application of a commercial grade of undercoating should secure the long, rust-free life we had set out to accomplish from the start. Before installation of the custom matting from Alex Jimenez of FJ Colusa in Florida, McClain and his business partner Beau installed a layer of sound-deadening, heat-insulating membrane throughout the vehicle. They also installed all-new rubber components from engine and body mounts to door seals. A new Painless wiring harness replaced the original, troublesome rat's nest along with new grommets and rubber boots throughout. The rig is almost air tight and rattle-free now and all the electrics work perfectly.

They also refitted the doors, repairing sprung hinges and fabricating a new ambulance door threshold which showed signs of pitting. New paint inhibits real world use without regrettable damage so we chose to make this a "patina build," keeping the external signs of age, hinting at the stories Chris and his boys could tell about their early adventures with this wise old relic.

The engine bay was treated with kid gloves, stripping and repainting every inch with the factory Sky Blue. The new engine and wiring harness played nicely against this background, leaving a clean, semi-custom look displaying the magnificent Redline Land Cruiser Holly Sniper install kit, newly rebuilt motor and other necessary mods. McClain's attention to detail was revealed here as wiring and hose layout were show quality.

Stainless steel brake lines went on before the body was reinstalled, along with a new brake and clutch master cylinder. Once back home I installed new front brake calipers and rear wheel cylinders, cleaning and painting each component group with two coats of POR 15 to prevent rust and improve surface durability. POR 15 was also used on axle housings and steering links.

I had broken a finger a few years back, driving in the rough with the old manual steering. The steering wheel got loose and spun, nailing my pinky with a spoke, a painful reminder of the value of power steering. JT Outfitters helped me come up with a fine Toyota Mini Truck steering box bracket and GM-style pump.

Air conditioning was a must if we were to use the truck during our Oklahoma summers so I contacted Joe Neel at Old Air for his advice on a kit that would not be as obtrusive as some of the under-dash offerings. Their Hurricane heater and AC system tucks in behind the dash. For clearance, we fabricated a miniature glove box which still provides room for a few essentials. We chose to install round, factory-style vent louvers in the corners of the dash and two small rectangular vents in the middle. This configuration frees up the transmission tunnel and a solid steel Tuffy Console provides an armrest and plenty of extra storage, plus a secure home for a two-way or conventional radio. We used a Vintage Air AC/Alternator bracket and their 140 amp, one-wire alternator hangs under the compressor to run the Sniper EFI and keep the battery charged while using the Warn 8274 Winch.





The result was exactly what we had hoped for. My wife and I drove the truck more than 3,000 miles throughout the American West with the only concerns being the need for proper front-end alignment and elevated engine temperatures, an issue we are in the process of correcting by adding a heavy-duty, four-core radiator from Redline Land Cruisers. Ride quality is now civilized, and performance, especially low-end torque, is better than any 2F Land Cruiser I've had the pleasure of driving. The balanced motor runs incredibly smooth and

A Dakota Digital instrument cluster replaced the original speedometer setup. This amazing bit of technology gives us not only visible gauges and lighting color options, but also a trip gauge, fuel mileage counter, on-board speedometer calibration and other amenities, hidden beneath its period appearance.

Some parts were like hen's teeth to find but Mike Denison and Adam Weeks at Cruiser Corps came through with a much-needed radiator shroud, used OEM air cleaner setup, rear door latch and countless other hard-to-find bits and pieces. Cool Cruisers became a go-to for hardware kits, motor mounts, rubber door seals and a headliner. Classic Cruisers in Colorado provided a perfect replica of the fiberglass top, replacing the old, blue caved-in original.

Other specialty parts such as door panels, exhaust manifold rings, rubber grommets, pass-through boots and priceless technical advice came from John at Specter Off Road in California. His counsel and direction to correct parts proved critical on more than one occasion.

Our old suspension was stiff, to say the least. I was interviewed by a friend for a story on overlanding while driving the truck off road in Arkansas and the whole time we laughed at how incredibly rough this rig was to drive. Terrain Tamer came to the rescue with their incredibly soft riding parabolic springs, shipped straight from Australia. I also used Terrain Tamer's heavy duty tie rod ends to replace the originals. I since learned that Georg Esterer at Cruiser Brothers in Stockton, California is a Terrain Tamer dealer. Georg became another valuable asset with his depth of knowledge including alignment and drivability.

power delivery is incredible. Thanks to AC and power steering, this truck has become my go-to, everyday driver. Indeed, it does go far and if schemes can become dreams come true, I expect Elsie to take us with her for many more years. **X4**

## BILL DRAGOO

AUTHOR BIO



Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill's not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he's busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the "GS of Trucks".

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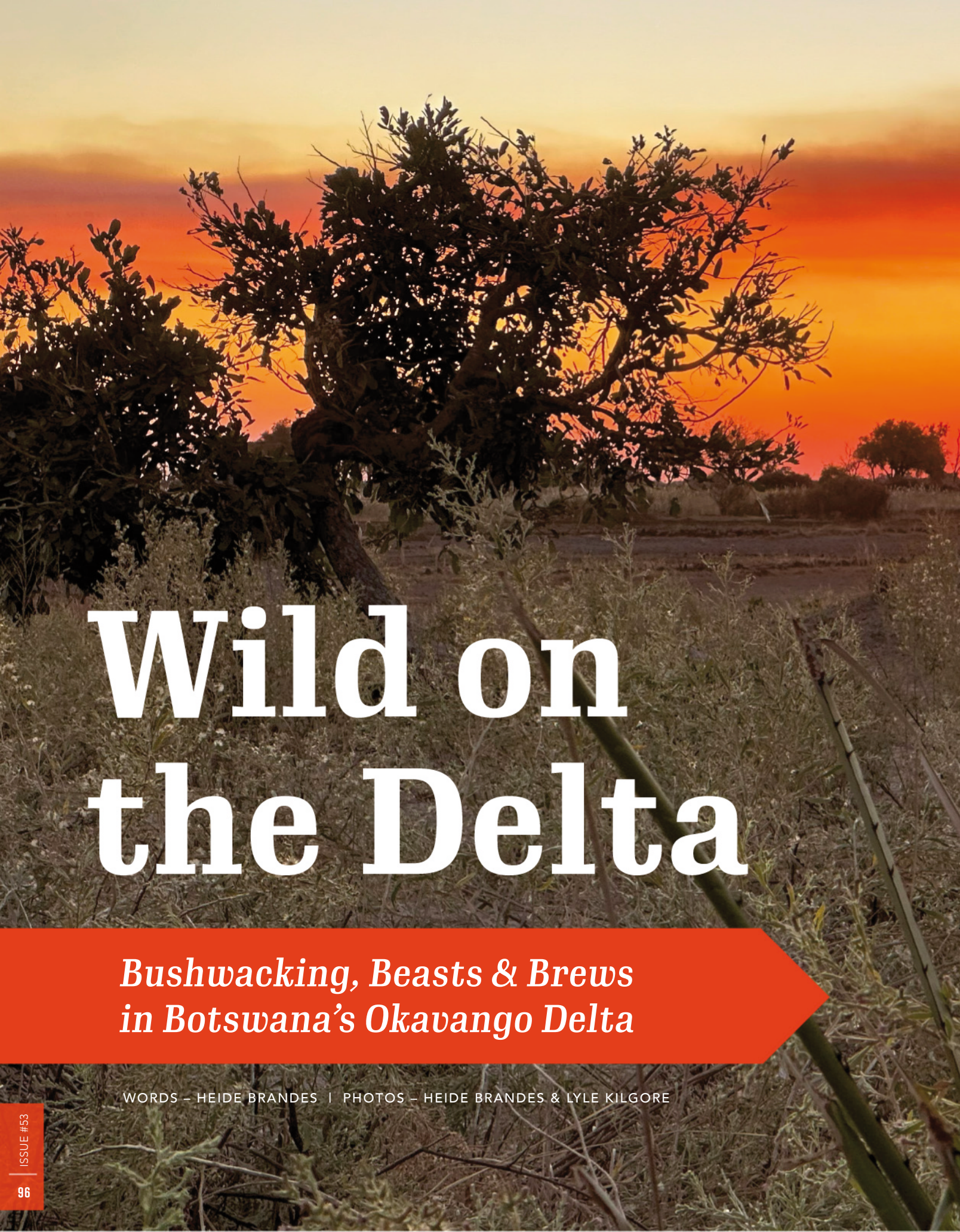
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# Wild on the Delta

*Bushwacking, Beasts & Brews  
in Botswana's Okavango Delta*

WORDS – HEIDE BRANDES | PHOTOS – HEIDE BRANDES & LYLE KILGORE







## **“Hey, you hear that? Something is out there!”**

My friend and fellow adventurer Lyle poked an elbow into my ribs, jarring me from a cold, uneasy sleep. I popped my eyes open and listened intently through the walls of the little canvas tent for whatever woke him.

Something big huffed a grunting breath out there in the dark. The scrubby brush of our campsite in Botswana’s Okavango Delta rustled as whatever it was moved through our camp. In the distance, a lion roared three times. I was uncomfortably aware of how little protection our canvas tent would provide if any of Africa’s creatures decided to come at us.

In July, the nights are frigid on the little island in the delta. The days simmer with an oppressive heat that makes the constant dust sparkle in the air, but the nights dip into the 30s. I slept fully clothed and in my puffer jacket to ward off the surprising chill.

“A hippo came into camp last night,” said our Intrepid Travel guide Papi as we huddled over breakfast the next morning. In the waters surrounding our piece of land, a large pod of hippopotamuses grunted, and of all the animals we had encountered on our trip, they worried me the most.

Notoriously ill-tempered and aggressive, hippopotamuses are considered one of the most dangerous animals in Africa. They are highly territorial and aggressive, especially when they feel threatened or when protecting their young. With powerful jaws capable of exerting a bite force of around 1,800 pounds per square inch, they can easily crush bone, making them a formidable threat to both humans and other animals that venture too close to their aquatic domains. In fact, hippos kill about 500 people every year, and I didn’t want to be a statistic.

“A friend of mine was crushed in half by one,” Papi added ominously.

Nestled within the heart of Botswana’s arid Kalahari Desert lies the Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site unveiling as a mosaic of meandering waterways, sandy and green islands, and sprawling floodplains teeming with an astonishing array of wildlife. The delta’s creation is a tale of geological marvel and climatic serendipity, resulting in one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet.

Lyle and I had signed up for a rather rustic exploration of this region that entailed 10 nights of camping—at times primitive camping—to experience this still-wild place. In that maze of water and islands, we found a place seemingly untouched by time and the modern world, a place worth experiencing and saving, unique innovations to coexist with wildlife, and a beauty all its own.

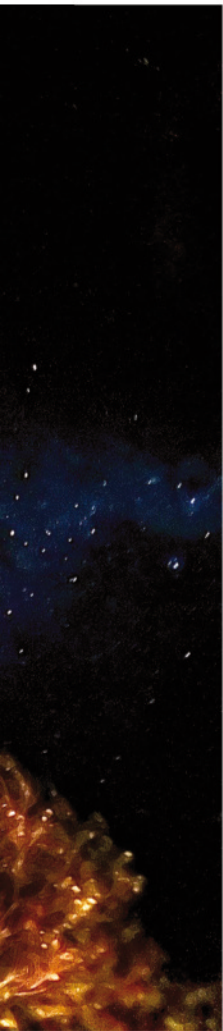
### **THE LIFEBLOOD OF BOTSWANA**

The Okavango Delta’s lifeblood is the Okavango River, which originates in the highlands of Angola and embarks on a 1,500-kilometer journey southeast only to vanish into the thirsty sands of the Kalahari. Unlike most rivers that find their way to the ocean, the Okavango’s waters spread out to form a spectacular inland delta covering an area between 6,000 and 15,000 square kilometers. Geologically, this phenomenon is the result of a tectonic trough, a depression in the Earth’s crust that traps the river’s waters in a vast alluvial fan.

Loading up our small canvas tent, sleeping bags and camp gear, we and our 15 other Intrepid Travel adventurers bumped down dirt roads from Botswana’s third-largest city of Muan to reach our set-in point. Along the road, we passed never-ending signs of the elephants—footprints and droppings—that thrive in the area, small local villages, and rangy cattle before meeting our “polers.”







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The most effective way to traverse the Okavango Delta is by mokoro, a type of slender canoe carved traditionally from a single tree trunk, now often replaced by eco-friendly fiberglass. These canoes are the lifeline of the delta, gliding silently over the clear waters, expertly navigated by the polers. The local guides, standing at the stern with a long pole in hand, possess an intimate knowledge of the waterways, and with each push against the soft riverbed, they propel the mokoro forward, their eyes scanning the horizon for hidden channels and wildlife.

The poler's role is one of skill and harmony with nature, a dance with the elements, as they maneuver through papyrus reeds and water lilies, dodging angry hippos that open their mouths in threat and grunt warnings from the banks. They were also incredibly efficient in our primitive camp, washing dishes, digging latrines, and making sure wildlife stayed at bay.

Despite their quiet demeanors, at night, they performed songs and traditional dances for us, some quite funny. As the rest of us tucked into sleeping bags, the ladies did what ladies usually do—sat around a fire and laughed loudly at the ridiculousness of life.

The delta's geology is as dynamic as its waters. The region was once part of Lake Makgadikgadi, an ancient super-lake that has since dried up. Today, the delta's flat landscape, with less than two meters of elevation variation, is punctuated by islands formed by termite mounds and channels carved by the movements of larger animals such as hippos and elephants. These natural architects, along with annual floods, continually reshape the delta, creating a patchwork of habitats that support an incredible diversity of life.

On our first safari walk, we spied a family of elephants in the distance. In what seemed less than three or four minutes, the four adults and two babies closed the distance between us—surprisingly fast.

"Move quickly but slowly," said our local guide Shoos. "Come, now, but move calmly."

Suddenly, the elephants were a stone's throw away. Their dark eyes locked on us, trunks swaying. Torn between being hypnotized by their majesty and fearing a charge from an angry mother, we were a little lethargic on "moving quickly but slowly away." When we moved up an incline to some scrubby trees, a mother and her baby followed uncomfortably close. Another boldly ate leaves from trees just on the edge of our camp, forcing us to hide near the "bushy bushy" camp latrine dug the night before.

The Okavango's seasons are defined by water. The annual flooding, peaking between June and August, is a spectacle to behold. The delta swells to three times its permanent size, transforming the dry land into a fertile paradise. The floodwaters bring life, and with it, a great migration of wildlife, making the delta one of Africa's greatest concentrations of animals.

We arrived just a few weeks before the great flood. Vast dried lakes sat empty but for muddy puddles that attracted herds of skittish red lechwe antelope. Shoos, finding the footprints of the lion we heard roaring into the night, wove us through tall savannah grasses until a family of giraffes lumbered out of the trees, pausing to give us a wary once-over before continuing their graceful strut away.

Death is king here. A bleached giraffe skeleton—perhaps from the same family group we just saw—laid baking in the sun.

"Lion, probably," Shoos said, handing over a leg bone that weighed more than I expected.

The biodiversity of the Okavango Delta is staggering. It is a stronghold for endangered and vulnerable species such as the cheetah, African wild dog, and lion. The delta supports the world's largest remaining population of elephants, is thick with the grunting rumbles of hippos, and is a haven for hundreds of bird spe-

cies, making it a bird watcher's paradise. Rhinoceros were once abundant here, but poachers did their damage.

The Khama Rhino Sanctuary, located in Botswana's Kalahari Sandveld, was created as a haven for one of Africa's most iconic species. Established in 1992, this community-based wildlife project spans approximately 8,600 hectares and was designed to protect and proliferate the rhinoceros population. It is also home to 30 other mammal species and more than 230 species of birds.

Under the vigilant watch of anti-poaching patrols that shoot suspicious interlopers first and ask questions later, the Khama Rhino Sanctuary is a place where visitors can witness the gentle giants in their natural habitat, contributing to the sanctuary's efforts through tourism. The sanctuary also plays a crucial educational role. Its environmental education center enlightens visitors about the importance of conservation and the evil cruelty of poaching.

On our last night camping in the delta, we sat around a campfire and stared into the impossibly bright Milky Way, listening to the hippos make their farting grunts from the waters. That night, a Cape buffalo came for a visit, making more noise than the hippo the night before.

As dawn broke, the lion roared again.

## **FINDING BALANCE BETWEEN MAN AND BEAST**

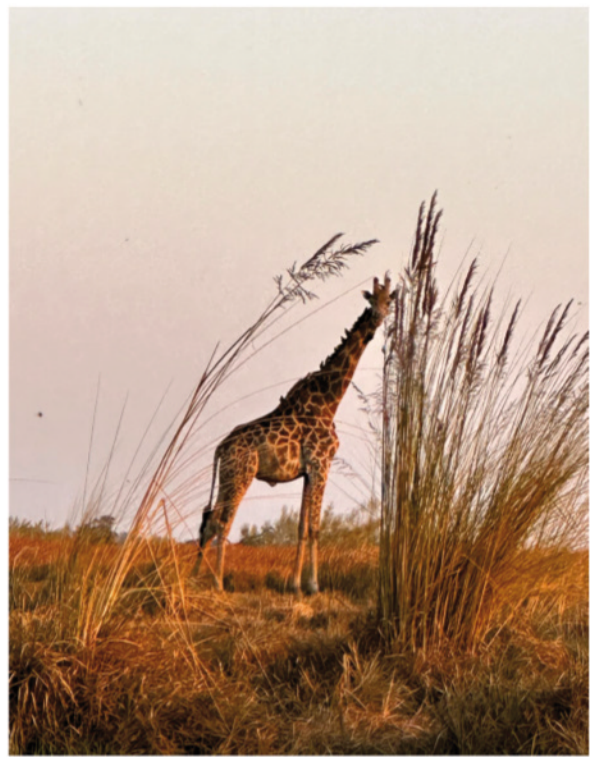
The Okavango Delta is not just a refuge for wildlife; it is a vital resource for humans, too. It provides water for millions of people and is an integral part of the local economy, supporting tourism and sustainable fishing practices.

Farmers surrounding the delta raise mostly millet, a type of grain. However, when the government issued land grants to the farmers, they didn't consider the migration routes of Botswana's elephants.











In Muan, a unique experiment in conservation and sustainable development is unfolding. The Okavango Craft Brewery, born from the vision of eco-researchers Graham McCulloch, Ph.D., and Anna Songhurst, Ph.D., founders of the non-governmental organization Ecoexist, stands as a testament to the delicate balance between human needs and wildlife preservation in one of Africa's most biodiverse regions.

The brewery's story begins in the Eastern Panhandle of the Okavango Delta, an 8,000-square-kilometer area where approximately 18,000 elephants share the landscape with an equal number of human inhabitants. This coexistence is not without its challenges.

As elephants follow ancient migratory routes to access water sources, they must navigate through 14 villages, creating potential for conflict with local farmers and disrupting daily life, including children's early morning journeys to one of the region's six schools.

Ecoexist, dedicated to mitigating human-wildlife conflict, has developed a multifaceted approach to promote better coexistence between man and elephant. Their strategies include installing solar-powered electric fences, strategically placing beehives (a natural elephant deterrent), and using chili-infused barriers to protect crops without harming the elephants.

The organization's work goes beyond immediate conflict resolution, though. By fitting matriarch elephants with GPS collars, researchers can track herd movements and better understand their behavior. This data informs land-use planning, helping government officials consider elephant corridors when allocating residential and agricultural plots.

"We cannot ask the farmers to move from their homes, and we cannot ask the elephants not to pass through there," said McCulloch. "Our country is almost 70% desert, so only 30% has food and water. We have to compete against these magnificent animals for the same resources."

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of this conservation effort is the Okavango Craft Brewery itself. Established in 2019, the brewery sources millet from local farmers who adhere to elephant-friendly farming practices. By offering a premium price for their millet, the brewery incentivizes conservation efforts and provides a sustainable income source for the community.

"We are currently buying millet from around 85 farmers at a premium price to reward their efforts towards conservation by not killing the wildlife that they are living with," McCulloch said.

The brewery's flagship product, Delta Lager, contains up to 58% locally sourced millet, creating a unique flavor profile while supporting the region's economy. This "elephant economy" serves as a tangible example of how conservation and commerce can work hand in hand.

After our rustic nights in the Okavango, that beer tasted as sweet as the fruit of the marula trees on which animals get drunk. We toured the facility, learning how the addition of millet sets their brews apart. More than just a lesson in beer-making, though, the Okavango Craft Brewery represents a microcosm of the larger issues facing the region—it

demonstrates how innovative thinking can transform potential conflict into opportunity, creating a model for sustainable development that benefits both human communities and wildlife.

## A DELICATE DANCE

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over Botswana, I reflected on the nights spent among the haunting calls of lions, the close encounters with elephants, and the laughter around the campfire.

The Okavango Delta is a delicate dance between man and beast, a place where ancient migratory routes intersect with modern lives. The Okavango Craft Brewery, with its elephant-friendly practices and Delta Lager, proves what humanity can achieve if we work together with nature, but so do the local guides and polers who live among the Delta's waters.

This adventure was not just about the thrill of the chase. It was about coexistence, innovation, and the promise of a brighter future. So, as the sun set over the horizon and turned the sky fiery red, I raised my glass to the Okavango—a place where adventure and conservation dance together. **X4**

## HEIDE BRANDES

AUTHOR BIO



Heide Brandes is an award-winning journalist and editor with more than 20 years of experience writing for numerous state, regional, and national publications. Her writing has appeared in National Geographic, BBC Travel, Southern Living, The Smithsonian, Cowboys & Indians, Sierra Magazine, ROVA, Roadtrippers, Garden & Gun, Forbes and more.

Besides freelancing fulltime, Heide is an avid traveler, medieval warrior, hiker, professional belly dancer and belly dance instructor and kind of a quirky chick who lives in Oklahoma City.



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## Cooking at Basecamp with the Omnia Oven

There have been times out camping, whether with friends, family, or a youth group, where the cravings hit hard for some fresh baked muffins, cookies, or other creations that can only come from an oven. I know some of these things can be made in traditional Dutch ovens, but those are heavy and bulky. This is why the Omnia Oven caught my eye the first time I saw it.

The Omnia Oven looks like a bundt cake pan with a lid, but it is more than that. It is uniquely designed to allow you to bake without a traditional oven. The three-piece instrument can be used as an oven when camping or in a small apartment that only has a stovetop.

The base Omnia Oven comes with the lid, pan, and base. When in use, the design moves hot air up through the middle of the oven, and as it hits the lid, it cooks the food from the top. The bottom plate also keeps the pan from direct heat, cooking evenly from the bottom.

The oven is all you need to get started, but accessories like silicon inserts can come in handy. Omnia also sells a cookbook and several storage options.

The day before I got the oven, my wife baked some chocolate chip cookies. Knowing the Omnia was on its way, I saved some batter to see if I could do the same with it. I loaded cookie dough into the greased silicon muffin insert and gave it a try. It took about twice as long to cook, but I ended up with some tasty chocolate chip cookie muffins. I did this first bake on an electric stovetop, and it worked great. Nothing was burnt.

For my next meal, I decided to try a breakfast casserole (recipe included in this article). I cooked up the bacon and used the residual fat to grease the pan. I loaded up the hashbrowns first, then the bacon. I added a light onion to it and then poured the eggs over the top. As I was experimenting and testing, I didn't know how long I needed to cook the casserole. After about



twenty minutes, though, it was done and turned out very well with a nice golden brown on the bottom, and the eggs were not runny.

These first two meals were made on an electric stovetop, and I wanted to see how it would work on a gas burner like I would have out camping. To test this, I did the same breakfast casserole on a gas burner. Omnia suggests using the gas on the lowest setting, so that's what I did. I also used the silicon insert. The casserole took a bit longer to cook but turned out great, with no burning, and the silicon insert made for easy cleanup.

The Omnia Oven works like it's supposed to, although I can see how you can burn your food if the heat source is set too high. I recommend practicing a few recipes at home before you head to your favorite camping spot. The pan and lid get very hot, so be careful. With the Omnia, you can plan your favorite oven recipes and cook them while out camping. It's one more tool that can be added to your camp kitchen.



### LIKES:

- Allows you to easily bake while out camping
- Easy to use on gas or electric stoves
- Lightweight

### DISLIKES:

- Accessories cost extra
- Easy to dent the pan with square edge kitchen utensils

Cost: Basic, \$79.99;

Omnia Kit 1, \$169.99 (Includes the Basic as well as case, silicon mold, oven grill, bag, and oven mitts)

Learn more and pick up an Omnia Oven by visiting <https://buyomniaus.com> or by scanning the QR code





## Breakfast Casserole

- 5-6 Large Eggs
- 1 box of dehydrated hashbrowns
- 1 can of diced chilis (optional)
- ½ yellow onion diced (optional)
- 1 cup of cheese
- Meat of your choice (bacon, ham, sausage, hot dogs, etc.)

Depending on your meat choice, you may need to cook it first, then set it aside while you then go to the hashbrowns. Boil water to rehydrate the hashbrowns. Once you have the hashbrowns rehydrating (this should take about 10 minutes), start the burner and turn it to low heat. Set the Omnia Oven on the burner to pre-heat it. If using the silicon insert, don't put it in until you are ready to assemble the casserole. Whisk up the eggs and dice the onion. Open the can of green chilis. Once the hashbrowns are ready, it's time to layer the ingredients. Make sure the pan or silicon insert is greased, then add the hashbrowns and spread evenly. Place meat evenly on top of the hashbrowns and then evenly spread the diced onions and green chilis. Next, pour the eggs evenly over the top, then top with the cheese. Place the silicon insert into the Omnia Oven and cover with the lid. After about 10 minutes, check to see how it's cooking. I use a fork or toothpick to see if the eggs are cooked. Total cook time can vary between 20-40 minutes depending on your heat source (burner size, gas or electric). Once it is done, carefully pull it off the burner and let it rest for a few minutes. The pan and lid will be very hot. When you are ready to serve, scoop out everyone's serving (use a round spoon and not a square spatula as its edges will dent the oven). **Enjoy. X4**





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## 2025 OREGON TRAIL'R TERRADROP ALPHA

WORDS & PHOTOS – BRUCE W. SMITH

One primary feature of overlanding is having the ability to camp comfortably off grid for days at a time while keeping the ecological footprint as small as possible. My wife and I had the opportunity to spend a few days in a great camp trailer that's been a standout in this category for more than a decade: Oregon Trail'R's [TerraDrop Alpha](#) (TDA).

The TDA is the flagship among five models built in-house by this small, family-run RV manufacturer in Eugene, Oregon. It is a strong, extremely well-crafted camp

***Oregon Trail'R's Flagship  
Off-Road Teardrop is a Fine  
Tow for Overlanding Couples***

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only the best Baltic Birch wood, the best waterproof glues, and cover all seams and end-grain (edges) with penetrating epoxy just like it's done in the sailboat industry. To us, one of the most important aspects of overlanding camper production is [water-proofing](#) inside and out."

This 13-foot trailer's 8'L x 5'W x 4'H insulated body has a queen bed sleeping space filled with two thick cushions that provide excellent sleeping comfort. Additionally, the cabin is fitted with an array of cubbies, racks and storage cabinets, 12V/120V plug-ins and charging outlets, a three-speed ceiling fan, and adjustable

LED lighting. The trailer's 12-volt electrical system is powered by a deep-cycle AGM battery and controlled by a 4000-series [Progressive Dynamics](#) power center. Multiple battery and solar upgrades are available.

Oregon Trail'R has also done a great job designing the galley under the rear hatch. The hatch is supported by a pair of robust springs and lifts high to provide unabated access to the upper shelf while protecting the work area from direct exposure to falling rain. The hatch also has triple seals that keep dust out when traveling dusty backroads.



trailer with independent suspension, tons of custom features, and a dry weight of just 1,600 pounds, which means it can be towed by many of today's popular AWD crossovers and mid-size SUVs. We hitched it to a 2024 Ford [Bronco Raptor](#) while camping and exploring the back roads in Oregon's Coast Range.

"All of our trailers are essentially built like giant custom cabinets that are covered with an armor-like blend of [Platinum Line-X](#) bedliner coating," says founder and co-owner Jon Christianson, "We use





The TDA comes in four trim levels: Base, Standard, Deluxe and Custom. The Deluxe model (\$35,000 as tested) we camped in for several days came equipped with a portable [Camp Chef](#) Mountain Series two-burner stove fed off a 16-ounce gas bottle, both of which store in the large space under the Formica counter. It also sported side awnings and a [Waterport](#) eight-gallon solar shower on the roof rack.

Overall, Oregon Trail’R’s TerraDrop Alpha Deluxe is a great choice for overlanding because it has a long list of customizable options for specific needs. Plus, it’s a trailer built in the Pacific Northwest that can be passed on to the next generation of overlanders. Oh, and did I mention Oregon Trail’R has a [rental](#) program through which you can pick up a TerraDrop Alpha direct from the company’s facility to try before you buy? **X4**

To learn more, visit [www.oregontrailerquotes.net](http://www.oregontrailerquotes.net)

**SPECIFICATIONS**

|                         |                                                                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Model/Trim .....        | TerraDrop Alpha - Deluxe                                          |
| UVW .....               | 1,640 lbs.                                                        |
| GVWR .....              | 3,500 lbs.                                                        |
| Tonque Weight .....     | 185 lbs.                                                          |
| Axle Capacity .....     | Independent; 5,200 lbs.                                           |
| Sleeping Capacity ..... | 2                                                                 |
| Exterior Length .....   | 13’                                                               |
| Exterior Width .....    | 6’8”                                                              |
| Exterior Height .....   | 6’                                                                |
| Interior Height .....   | 48”                                                               |
| Interior Width .....    | 60”                                                               |
| Interior Length .....   | 72”                                                               |
| Construction:           | Tubular steel frame; Line-X coated marine-grade Baltic Birch body |
| Tires/Wheels .....      | 31x10.50R16                                                       |
| Base MSRP .....         | \$24,000                                                          |
| Price (As Tested) ..... | \$35,500                                                          |

Oregon Trail’R; 541-357-8895;  
[www.oregontrailer.net](http://www.oregontrailer.net)



We had the joy of towing the TerraDrop Alpha behind Ford’s 2024 Bronco four-door (\$90,035). This top-tier Bronco is one of the best short wheelbase 4x4s on the market. The Raptor is capable of traversing the most demanding off-road trails and backcountry conditions most overland adventurers would ever encounter. Ford’s premium Bronco model has a 4,500-pound tow rating and a 413-horsepower 3.0L EcoBoost V6 mated to a 10-speed automatic. It pulled the TDA without the slightest hesitation. If you’re serious about off-roading, boondocking, and camping off grid, it’d be really hard to beat a Bronco Raptor.



**BRUCE SMITH** ————— **AUTHOR BIO**

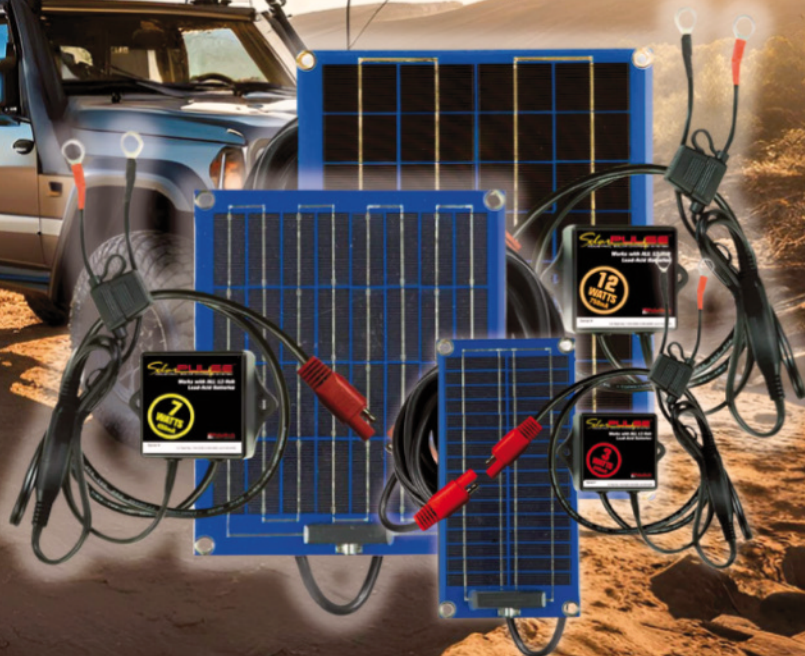


Bruce is a photojournalist specializing in automotive, RV, boating, and ATV markets. Bruce has more than 30 years of experience in all aspects of magazine and digital media, from columnist and staff writer, to editor and editorial director. He has served on the editorial staff of such publications as Motortrend, American Hunter, Sports Afield, Trailer Life, Motorhome, RV Magazine, Family RVing, Wheels Afield, GearJunkie, CamperSmarts, Bass & Walleye BOATS, Trailer BOATS, Hard Working Trucks, ProPickup, Camping Life, Four Wheeler, Diesel Power, Jp Magazine, Off-Road Adventures, Truck Trend, Off-Road, and Auto World Weekly, and has had articles published in more than 100 other publications around the world. He currently provides freelance content and photography for RV and automotive media through his company, Smith Editorial Services.



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